

**Harold D. Crager**  
**Interview 117a**  
**November 30, 1987**  
**Christian Barger, Interviewer**  
**Dorothy Farley, Transcriber**  
**Retyped by Courtney Lawrence**

**ABSTRACT:** Harold Crager recalls his entrance into the Air Force in 1948. He remembers signing up and shipping out to San Antonio, enduring basic training, and the skills he gained in those 13 weeks.

**Christian Barger (hereafter CB):** My name is Christian Barger and I am interviewing Harold Crager on November 30, 1987. You were in the Air Force?

**Harold Crager (hereafter HC):** Yes.

**CB:** What year?

**HC:** 1948, July.

**CB:** What did you go in as?

**HC:** Everybody goes in with the same head of hair, the same pair of shoes, we are all Privates. This was just after the Air Force had changed from the Army over to the Air Force and was going through the rigors of change. We still wore the Army uniform at the time; the only difference was we wore an emblem of a pair of wings and a spinning propeller on one side and the U. S. on the other. People in the Army wore cross infantry rifles. We were still called Privates at that time before they made the change of the airman classification.

**CB:** You went through basic training or N. C. O. training?

**HC:** Yes, to both questions. Basic training, at that time, a lot longer than it is now and much longer than it was during World War II. After all, during World War II or any war time period they must accelerate training due to the contingences of the war so, there being no war in 1948 basic training was thirteen weeks long. Basic training for the Air Force at that time was held at three different places. Lackland Air Force Base in Texas, Shepherd Air Force Base in Texas and at that time Amarillo Air Force Base had a contingent of basic trainees, but there was one more basic training unit that was formed during this period and that was in New York State. I went through basic training, thank goodness, in the cool, cool of the summer, 1948.

**CB:** What was your daily routine?

**HC:** Panic. In July of 1948 I was nineteen years old. At that time this was the farthest I had lived away from my mom and that's just about the way everybody's life is, that everything is panic. I'll give you a routine and I'll tell you what my thoughts were. I left Lufkin, Texas on July 16, 1948 after being sworn in at the Air Force recruiting station on the corner of Shepherd and Second Street. I think there is an auto supply house there now, or a karate school. That's what it was at that time, armed forces recruiting hall. I did go into the Air Force for a specific reason, I didn't want to go in the Army, that is the best I can tell you, and the Navy was not taking anyone. There was a Chief Petty Officer in Lufkin and he said he still had Chief Petty Officers who were waiting to get back in after they had gotten out during, or after World War II. He said it could probably be anywhere from six months to two years before I could get in. But please remember, in those days we still had a little thing called the "Draft Act" which was still in force but not at that time. No one was being drafted, they didn't have to be. There was enough people still in peace time army. So I knew a recruiter there, a young Staff Sergeant and he, for some reason or another, he got my papers for the Air Force all filled out and I departed Lufkin on that date on a Trailway bus going to Palestine, Texas where I caught a train, sometime during the night and we were rudely awakened about 5:30 the next morning that had pulled into the old Union Station in San Antonio, climbed into the back of 6 x 5's, which are two and a half ton tandem driven trucks and driven from there across the east side of town, which is bad, through the west side of town, which was worse. Passed the goat barns out on what is now Laredo Highway and ended up at a building on Lackland Air Force Base which, I believe, is just across from the Air Museum, the building on the left. I am going to give you a picture if you think they will do any good, you can have them and see what I looked like on my first day. And that is a laugh, because – you stand there and everybody laughs because everybody's hair is falling off on the floor. After about 30 seconds the guy says "next," you are shoved into line and somebody else is sitting there laughing at you because your hair is all on the floor.

They gave us uniforms, such as they were. In those days we had one piece fatigues, coveralls, and one size fit all, the sizes were "large, larger and largest." Honest to goodness, I've got a common size foot, since I was sixteen years old. I have worn a 9½ D, popular size shoe, so what do you think. When I got up there to draw my shoes – "What size did you say?" 9 ½ D. We're out and I am wearing a pair of Acme cowboy boots with my little old one piece larger than large fatigue and I did my marching for about the first five or six days in those good old Acme cowboy boots, marching, if that's what you want to call it. I don't remember too much after that, after we got our clothes, after we got all our hair cut off and got our clothes, we were taken over for breakfast. Breakfast was – I can't remember – I can remember a lot of breakfasts in the Air Force but I can't remember my first one, I don't think any of us ate too much. We were too hyped up to worry about what was going to happen next because – I remember a man named Arthur Clyed from Dayton, Ohio, who kept saying, "Man, they give you 14 shots the first day." Of course, that unnerved everybody terribly. They did not give you 14 shots the first day, I don't think they gave us over three the first day, then they would give you shots once a week because none of us had been immunized prior to our going there and they vaccinated you for everything you could think of, from yellow fever which nobody had had since they dug the Panama Canal on up to – we even got Anthrax shots.

The only way you could get Anthrax was meat that had been contaminated by the Anthrax disease, but I do remember it seemed like every time you turned around you either had those one piece fatigues off your shoulder or down around your knees according to where they wanted to shoot you. So Red was lying when he said they gave you 14 shots because I'm sure we had our 14 shots by the time we had been in basic training because some people lost their shot records, before they could get out of basic training, they had to go get their shots taken care of.

After breakfast we got our shots and then they took us to our barracks which are no longer standing but I showed you where it was, there, right behind the first row of airplanes on the field. I was assigned to technical basic training unit, BTU, which is BMI, Basic Military whatever – but I was in BM 19 flight 3361, I stayed in it for thirteen weeks. My Drill Sergeant, or at that time, our Flight Instructor they were called, was a Buck Sergeant from Alexandria, Virginia and I never shall forget, he was a real fine kid. As I look back on it he was probably a year older than I was because he had only been in the military a year. We were supposed to be his last flight to come through. In those days, just like I told you about Cadets. You stay an instructor for so long, then you get the base of your assignment, not the job you want but you get the base of your assignment because he left after we finished there, I stayed on. By the way as a flight instructor there for thirteen weeks, after he left, that's what I was telling you awhile ago, I wanted to stay so I stayed on and then was phased out some thirteen weeks later. But he was very gentle with us and what we wanted to do, what we wanted to learn – he was there to instruct us in all the world ways of the airman, soldiers, we were not called airmen then and he would teach us the basic functions of the military organization, how to shoot a pistol, how to shoot a rifle, a machine gun, a 50 caliber stationary machine gun. Why they had us shooting all those things, we never had to go to war but, still it was part of the military unit. We had our uniforms and felt very, very lost when they got us together and they said, "Okay, all civilian clothes in your bag that you brought with you, put it inside your bag and here is a tag, put it on there, because we are going to take it down tomorrow and mail it back to your family." They take away your bag, they take away your civilian shorts, they take away everything except my civilian boots because I still had to wear those. I shipped them back home to my mom. I guess that was good for a cry for her but not half as much as it was for me, I don't think, knowing that I was stuck there. They did that so you wouldn't run away. They took your civilian clothes from you so you couldn't run away. But I guess the first night was altogether the toughest, you probably think it is funny that I can still remember all these people's names. The man that slept above me was named Andrew Androlavich, he was a Polish boy – he was from Pittstown, Pennsylvania. The first night we were there, the lights went out. We didn't march the first day. We had had all those shots. We did eat one more meal, I don't think we had a noon meal, we had a light supper. Until 5 o'clock the next morning, it was about 5 o'clock they came beating a drum and turning on the lights and hollering, "Everybody out." Well, I didn't get much sleep that night because Andrew cried all night long. We wasn't alone, there were a lot of people – doing the same thing. You might do the same thing if you are ever forced to do anything like this. Young men when they leave their family, their mothers and all their friends the first time, suddenly find out that they are a long, long way from home and they don't know a soul and don't know what is going to happen next

and it is kind of frightening. That's what Andy thought. My thoughts were – I wish Andy would shut up so I could get some sleep. But I woke up the next morning and we went outside, lined up and marched to breakfast in the dark, no problem – nobody knows if you are out of step in the dark but we would go down and go through the chow line, and by then we were hungry and boy, you eat. We ate that good creamed beef on toast, or it is called “Sos” and bacon and eggs, you got one glass of milk, you didn't want too much liquid. After that we went back to the barracks and we were taught that morning how to make your bed, how to make a hood and how to make a white collar and how to make hospital bowls and how to spread a blanket so if somebody came along and flipped a quarter on it – it would bounce, and I can still make a white collar bed as good as anybody can because I know how to cheat and how to put the sheets in there under the old bed springs and stretch them really tight. Kept you out of trouble all the time. The hood was on during the day time, that means the bed was made up with the blanket pulled all the way up under the pillow and then you doubled the other blanket and made a good on it, that was to keep the sand from blowing in your bunk. I'll bet you can't believe this, we didn't have air conditioning in our barracks. We didn't even have stoves in our barracks, I don't know what they would do in the winter time. We did not have any window fans, we didn't even have any over head fans but we slept well because we slept with the windows open at night and up on top of Sacks Hill there in San Antonio the wind would blow and it would get cold at night, even in July; it would come down from 110 during the day down to 75 at night. But we learned to make our beds that day. Then we were given a book, I remember, the Air Force still do, we got Army manuals 35-10, our basic reading. Army manual 35-n is “How to be a soldier in one easy book.” It had everything in it that you would possibly want to know and it was the only manual we got the whole time we were in basic training, thirteen weeks and we still didn't get through it, it was so complete. It had everything from tying your shoes, folding your socks, how your shoes should be tied, that's why I still tie my shoes backward, that's why they end up with the bow worn up and down instead of across like they are supposed to. How do yours go? Across or up and down? See, my ties go up and down because that's the way you are taught to do it because, according to the uniform, if you are going to wear a uniform everything has to be uniform.

**CB:** Nothing could be dangling out?

**HC:** Well, the shoe laces, they were so cheap in those days the shoe laces were just barely long enough, we didn't have what they call boots; we had brogans, like tennis shoes, about the same height as tennis shoes, high top tennis shoes. But I only had to wear those boots about five or six days and they called us, the ones who didn't get our shoes, and some Corporal marched us down to clothing issue and sent us through and we were five or six days behind polishing because on that old rough leather you had to put two or three cans of shoe polish on it to get it shined up. But they called us out one day and we got our boots, our brogans and our dress shoes. You got taught all kind of wonderful things, one was how to shine brass. I've got a blitz cloth and you should see me use that thing. Well, I learned how to use a blitz cloth. But you know, in those days, they only let – if you had more than \$10.00, when you got that down there you had to send everything over \$10.00 back. We had to go buy our own toothpaste, our own razors,

our own blitz cloth, our own shoeshine polish and then one brush, one shine cloth and one dauber. Brush, you know.

**CB:** You should have gotten one person to buy the toothpaste, one person to buy all the shoeshine materials.

**HC:** You had no where to spend money because you couldn't go anywhere without asking somebody "Please, sir," and so there wasn't really any point in us keeping – for those who didn't have \$10.00 or those who didn't get there with any money, they got to draw a "flying ten" and they soon learned why they called it "flying ten" because by the time they went into the P.X. on their first trip to get all their goodies, when they came out they had the remainder of that \$10.00 you could hold in one hand in change. We were amazed at the cost of cigarettes, I believe cigarettes cost 75 cents a carton, 7 ½ cents a pack. Of course, I smoked a few, that was the only thing, they didn't have anything such as cheap lighters, had those that cost about a dollar and a half, but I had saved my Zippo and when I sent all my stuff back home I saved my lighter, it was a civilian lighter but they let me keep it, no one caught me. It was just – looking back on it now I would say it was probably one of the best learning periods of my life. I learned to take care of my own self, do my own laundry, fold my own clothes, make my own bed and once every six days you got a haircut whether you wanted it or not. You had to pay for your haircuts after the first one, the first one was free. I think it was a custom to tip the barber a nickel. From then on you had to pay for your haircut; haircuts were 15 cents a piece.

**CB:** About your money, if you spent all of it?

**HC:** I'll tell you, you had about that much left, they knew how much you were going to have, they had that \$10.00 spent for you.

**CB:** You had enough to buy this, this and this only.

**HC:** You know, we had enough to get a 15 cent haircut every six days because we got paid one time in basic training. We got paid a \$50.00 payment. They kept all the rest of it, for thirteen weeks. Most of us had more money the day we graduated from basic training than we had ever had before, so it was easier to come home after basic training. Funny things have happened, let me tell you something that was very funny. After about two weeks of basic training. I think I have told you this story before. I wouldn't be ashamed of it although, at the time I was very deeply ashamed. There was, in my flight, two men from Georgia that I remember, one was named Stell, the other was named Stull. I met Harry Stull in 1956. He was with the Embassy in London. But the kid named Stell was a big tall kid, like a farm boy, like myself. I was 5'8" weighed 127 pounds.

**CB:** 127 pounds?

**HC:** 127 pounds, a romping, stomping East Texas farm boy. But anyway, this young man named Stell was belligerent, very belligerent about everything and he and I had words sometime during the second week of basic training. We got into a little name calling

contest and they stopped everything and said "Tonight after chow, this quarrel will be settled the normal way quarrels should be settled." So that night between two barracks fifty-eight men formed a circle and myself and Stell came out, was told to strip off, fatigues down and strip them down and tie the arms around you so they won't fall down around your knees. Then they brought out there 16 oz. boxing gloves, which are like pillows, you know, put them on us and he was a lot taller than I was and he had great long arms but he didn't weigh much more than me. They said, "Okay, have at it." And I thought, "Well, we will beat the fool out of each other here." I jabbed out with a left real fast and hit him in the nose, and then I hit and crossed him with a right, hit him in the nose again, he wasn't doing anything, standing there with his arms down, boom, boom, boom, man, I mean I really worked him over. He finally got his hands up in front of his face, like so, and stopped hitting him in the face then. I was punching him in the arms, on the shoulders and in the chest, I began hitting him below the belt and he just wouldn't do anything, just stood there, and although they measured the first three minutes round and I got back over there. Everybody was cheering "Tet 'em, Tex." All the time I was gone I was called "Tex." Here was a little guy beating up on a big guy, so come up the next round and I punched him around a little bit, and I let him stay away then a little bit. He started crying, when he started crying, boy, that made me mad because nobody was going to cry all over me. I bopped him two or three times and finally he fell down on his knees and would not get up. I didn't feel too good about that but we were told to go back in and carry on with what we were doing, back in the barracks. Stell didn't come back in and finally about 8 o'clock the Sergeant brought him back in. He came by my bed and got me and the guy in the upper bunk. The other thirty men lived downstairs. He came up to my bunk and said, "Come up to my room." I went up to his room, you know, and I walked in and I snapped to and saluted and reported, and he said, "Private Stell will be with us tonight but he won't be with us after tonight because he will be leaving and going back to Macon, Georgia tomorrow. I asked "Why." He said "Does that make you feel good." "No, sir." "Do you know why he is going to not be with us after tonight?" "No, sir." "He is getting a minority discharge." He was a minor. "We checked with him and he told us he had lied about his age, he is really only fourteen years old." And here I was a great big old 19 year old whipped up on a 14 year old. I felt about two inches high, I never spoke to him again. We went to breakfast next morning, Stell fell out and they took him over and processed him out and discharged him and shipped him back to Georgia. But I always thought, "Boy" but those things were not funny in those days, they are now because I'm sure he went on back home and probably ended up back in the Air Force three or four years later.

The officers that we had in the basic training were a Captain, a First Lieutenant, and about five or six Second Lieutenants. We had a Second Lieutenant named Lt. Beratis who was straight out of West Point. That was a biggy. Army officers did not come to the Air Force for no reason at all. He was waiting for flight training. He was nothing but bad, he was bad because he knew all those academy tricks they used and how bad they were up there. He would yell at you until the hair would stand up on the back of your neck, he was so mean. He knew how to drill and our Drill Sergeant couldn't get by with anything when Beratis was around because Beratis would call the Drill Sergeant down. When Beratis said "jump," we'd jump. There was another one who came in just about the last

four weeks of my basic training who was a West Pointer also. We really thought that was something and then, we found out our Squadron Commander was a West Pointer and he got these two young West Pointers assigned. But, Beratis, oh boy, I'll never forget him, if I live to be a hundred, which I have almost. Being from the country I made out a little better than some of them.

END OF INTERVIEW