

James F Lafferre Jr.

as interviewed by Judy Hansen
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I was born in Parkersburg West Virginia in 1919 to James Frances Sr. and Mary Ethel Petty Lafferre. My father was a plumber. I grew up on 615 Camden Street in Parkersburg being the oldest of seven siblings. I had four brothers and two sisters; Bill, Joe, John, Ed, Mary, and Betty.

I attended Jefferson School from the 1st grade to the 6th grade, Washington Jr. High from 7th to 10th grades, and graduated from Parkersburg High School in 1937. When I was in High School I worked for Broughton's Dairy Store which was a restaurant type business. They had sixteen to eighteen kinds of ice cream and served sandwiches & soup; it was that sort of thing. After school at 4:00 I went to work for them and worked until it closed at 11:00 pm. After the store closed I had to count the monies, make the supply order out for the next day's business, and stop by the bank to make the deposit, then walk $\frac{3}{4}$ mile home. I usually got home around 2:00 in the morning. It didn't work out too well because then I would have to get up early for school and I was only getting about 2 or 3 hours of sleep. I rented a room next door to where I worked so after I closed up I could just go to bed.

After I graduated, my friends and I all got together; there were 13 of us, and we started talking. Someone said something about wanting to go to the Air Force and fly airplanes. So the next day we all took a bus into Columbus, Ohio and went to the recruiting station. Only two of the group passed the flying training exam to fly. The rest of us felt the spirit of the recruiter and enlisted. On December 12, 1940 I enlisted in the United States Air Corp, I wasn't drafted. At that time the Air Corp was a Division of the Army.

After I enlisted I was waiting for my first assignment at Jefferson Barracks at Lemay Missouri just south of St. Louis. As a young kid I was going to try to make it easy on myself. I had learned some welding in my high school years so I wanted to attend their welding School. After four months and the welding school never opened up to me I changed my mind and decided to go to the mechanic school program.

I went to aircraft and engine maintenance school and graduated on October 24, 1941 with 771 hours of training. During the next fourteen months I was assigned duties as the crew chief to the BT-13 (basic trainer aircraft). It was used to train British Cadets at Macon, Georgia and then later at Walnut Ridge, Arkansas to assist our allies in fighting the Germans.



As a crew chief I was responsible to take care of the aircraft after the pilot landed and get it ready for the next flight. I would have to do the maintenance check and fix any problems with the aircraft. My aircraft was never out of commission very long so they offered me a commission which would have raised my rank to 2nd Lieutenant. I turned that down because I liked what I was doing. Thank goodness a month or so later they came and asked me again and that time I accepted. They made me flight chief. As a flight chief I had about seven or eight airplanes and their crew chiefs that I supervised and was responsible for. With the knowledge I had I was able to get in and start up an airplane and determine right away what was wrong. Then I would tell the crew chief so they could fix it.

After attending several schools of various subjects I attended Officer Candidate School (OCS) after being offered my commission and on May 29, 1943 graduated as 2nd Lieutenant.

I was assigned maintenance for the 776 B-24 bomber squadron of the 464 bomber group in Pocatello, Idaho. While I was stationed in Pocatello I went into town once in a while to the drug store to get stuff I needed and I met the owner's daughter. We were dating and a friend asked me to see if she would get a friend of hers so he could have a date. I asked this young lady and she agreed. She got her friend Marjorie Bevan to go on the date. Well, I liked Marjorie and later decided that I would date her. After a while we decided that we would get married. I married her on January 12, 1944 at the Pocatello Army Air Force Base. Later that year we had our first child James Michael.

The ones working on the B-24 was to go overseas but because I was married they transferred me to the base commander's office as his maintenance tactical advisor. If any of the planes on the base had problems I had to solve them for the commander.

They were training Mexican cadets for a while and then they started training American cadets in the P-47 Thunderbolt fighter aircraft. It later became known as the 'Jug' because if it developed any maintenance problems with its single piston engine it would just go straight down.

We received the newest model of the P-47, a long range fighter plane. The training for this aircraft was a top secret program in which the pilots were trained to escort the bombers over to Japan if needed because this newer model could fly further without stopping. They didn't want any other country to know we were training to go to Japan if it was needed. The unit ended up being disbanded because they didn't use the program.

On November 17, 1945 as a 1st Lieutenant I decided I'd had enough and left active duty. I moved back home to Parkersburg, West Virginia and became an officer in the reserves. I went to work selling life insurance for two years and during that period of time in December 1947 we had our daughter Jeannie. I continued to sell life insurance until 1950.

I went to work at North American Aviation in Columbus Ohio. They were producing the F-86 Sabre Jet and I became one of a six man round test flight crew. When that airplane came off the assembly line from the factory we went through it and corrected every error that was on that airplane to make it ready for the test pilot. The test pilot flew it and anything he found wrong we

would fix that and then it was sold to the Air Force. I enjoyed this kind of work because I enjoyed solving problems.

I only worked for North American Aviation for three months because the Army Air Corp found out that I was familiar with the F-86 and called me to active duty on 1 March 1953 as a 1st Lieutenant.

I started my 2nd tour of duty in 9 April 1953 during the Korean War. I was assigned to Laughlin Air Force Base in Del Rio, Texas. I continued with aircraft maintenance duties. There were T-33's and some F-84 jet trainers and I was the only maintenance officer. My job as an officer was to always oversee the maintenance of the airplanes. There was so much going on that after a couple of months they gave me a young ROTC officer to help me.

On May 1, 1954 Strategic Air Command (SAC) took over the base. SAC decided they were going to have the U-2 program. The U-2 spy program was a high altitude aircraft that went over the enemies and took pictures; electronically I guess, of what was going on down below. These pictures were fed into the top brass and they decided what program they would use, how they were going to fly the aircraft, and which aircraft (bomb or fighter) they would fly. I was one of the few who were transferred from the training command program into the SAC program.

In Del Rio schooling was ongoing all the time because I'd have to learn the new items that were on the planes, the procedures, and how to maintain things. Sometimes I was sent somewhere and other times they would do the training right at the base. After I would learn, I could teach it to those that were under me.

On Aug 18, 1957 I was sent on a one-year unaccompanied tour to Thule, Greenland. This was north of the Arctic Circle right up by the North Pole. My family couldn't go with me so they went to Bountiful, Utah for a year to have the support of my wife's family.

In Thule the temperature never got above 30 degrees. The airplane we had at that time, the B-47 couldn't fly from the United States to Russia so they had to have a place they could be re-fueled in order to make the trip. They didn't think the aircraft could make it back from Russia on one tank of fuel so that is why we opened the base on Thule. We had over 15 aircraft that would come up after being fueled in Washington State to Thule. We would re-fuel and check them out in Greenland and they would go onto Russia. All the planes that left for Russia thankfully always made it back after dropping their bombs. We never had any loses over Russia.

In 1958, after I got back from Greenland I was transferred to Castle Air Force Base in Atwater, California. We lived in Merced which was 20 minutes away from the base and we were there about five years. While I was there I had a heart attack at age 45. I was off work for a while. I had been raised in the Catholic Church. My wife was born a Mormon but I raised my children Catholic. As I remember, the Catholic Church claimed they existed during the time of Christ. I had a book on ancient history and I decided the Catholic Church couldn't be right and didn't exist during the time of Christ like they said. I also had a Book of Mormon that I read. My wife was kind of sneaky and would get away with putting markers in my book. While I was recuperating I invited the Stake Missionaries to come to the house and teach me and my family.

In June 1962 I joined the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints; I had been married 19 years. We joined the church on a Saturday and left Merced the following Monday because I had been transferred to Dyess Air Force base in Abilene, Texas.

I was in Strategic Air Command (SAC) and started as job control Officer on the 12th of July 1963 at Dyess Air Force Base. I lived there for about five years and then they transferred me to Thailand. I lived in Thailand for a year and during that time my family moved back to Merced. Thailand was a nice country and the people were nice.

When I finished my work in Thailand I was transferred to Griffiss Air Force Base in Rome, New York. This is where I was when I retired in 1969 with 30 years of service at the age of 50.

Throughout my service career I was able to advance through the ranks. As I went through the various grades I was given more responsibilities in the maintenance of the airplanes. I advanced through 2nd Lieutenant, 1st Lieutenant, Captain, Major, and retired as a Lieutenant Colonel. I could have been a Colonel in another two months but my wife said, "No." If I had advanced to Colonel they were going to send me overseas and she didn't want me to go.

After I retired I bought a trailer and traveled with my wife around the country for a year. My daughter got married Aug 16th, 1969 in Utah and my son married August 21st, 1969 in California. We traveled to both weddings. I promised my wife if she would follow me throughout my career she would be able to pick where we would live. She wanted to live in Utah so we moved to the east side of Salt Lake City for a year then built a home on the west side of Salt Lake off 5400 South and 2700 West. I went to work at ZCMI for a little bit and took a couple of trips to England and Europe to do genealogy. When my wife got too ill to care for herself, my daughter built an apartment in her home at 591 North Center in Lehi and we sold our home and moved in with her and her husband Robert Fox for four years. My wife died on July 19, 2002 and we buried her in Lehi.

My daughter decided to take me down to St. George so I could meet some guys to play golf with. She thought this would get me out of the slump I had gotten into after losing my wife. There was a woman across the street and I decided she was more interesting than the guys playing golf. After a year I remarried Ruth Roland in Robert & Jeannie's backyard. I moved to Bountiful with Ruth and then I bought a condo where I lived for seven years. When she passed away I moved back into the apartment with my daughter and son-in-law Robert and Jeannie Fox and have been living here with them for the last three years. My son J. Michael and his wife Susan live in Madera, California

I've loved my career with the United States Air Force. I've had a pretty good life and enjoyed the challenges that I have had. Although I am the oldest in my family I have outlived all my siblings.