

# Spencer G. Chamberlain

Interviewed by Judy Hansen

February 2021

I was born to Afton Dermont and Katherine Hales Chamberlain in American Fork, Utah on November 22, 1950. My parents grew up in Cedar Fort, Utah; the same place I did.

I am the youngest of my siblings Phillip, Curtis, and Margaret. I went to school at Lehi High and graduated in 1969. In Oct or Nov I was working on a LDS church welfare farm in Fairfield and the lottery came around. My good friend Vern Carson, still my best friend, said don't worry about the lottery we'll have high numbers. Well my number came out number 9 so I knew I was going to be drafted<sup>i</sup>. Instead of being drafted I went and joined the Air Force.



At that time when the lottery came out there were a lot of people trying to get in. They all wanted to have their own decision. I told my parents I needed to do something because I was #9 so I knew I would be going. I went down to Provo where the recruiters were. They asked if I wanted to go and told me they could get me in. I said, "Where do I sign." I signed on a Monday for four years and left the next week. When I got to basic training I got my draft card.

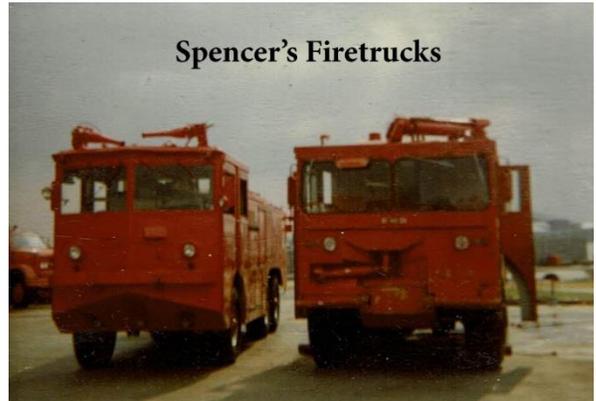
Everybody in my family served. My sister married a Captain in the Army, A helicopter pilot. Curtis served in the National Guard and Phillip was drafted. I was the only one that left the United States.

My draft number was #9 and I wanted to go on an LDS mission really bad and my mom wanted me to go. When my time for a mission came the LDS bishop should have been asking me. The bishop had a son the same age as me and his draft number came out #41 so he was going to be drafted. I kind-of understood it because they had a son who died of leukemia, a younger brother. The bishop waited, and waited, and waited, and the day I joined the Air Force he found out and then asked me to go on a mission. That was to keep his son from being drafted. Back in those days, Cedar Fort was only allowed to send two missionaries a year to go on missions because of the draft and everything. I would have been the 2<sup>nd</sup> one that year to go on a mission if I had went when I was supposed to have gone. Then the bishop's son wouldn't have gone on a mission. He would have been drafted. That is the way it worked. It was because of the size of the community, or ward. Cedar Fort was a small little town and if they let five missionaries go out then the draft wouldn't get anybody. Recently I was able to talk to this missionary because it had bothered me for a long time. I told him I understood why his dad did what he did. I didn't think this kid would have made it through Vietnam. He wouldn't have made it back. It is what it is and I'm glad that I went but I might have been a different person now if I had gone on a mission instead. It's OK with me.

I entered the Air Force on Dec 11, 1969 and had basic training in Lackland Air Force Base in San Antonio. I was then sent to Sheppard Air Force Base at Wichita Falls, Texas. I was in flight

training and air cargo master. I had to learn to load planes and how to put the cargo on the planes. Since I went to Lehi High I didn't learn Algebra or anything like that. I couldn't understand out how to figure out the weights. I passed everything but the math which was the most critical; how much load you have on a plane and how much fuel it will take to make the flight. It all went over my head so they sent me to Indian Springs Air Force Base, Nevada to teach me how to be a firefighter.

Being a Firefighter was the best job in the world. I loved it! They handed us some firefighting gear, said here is your truck, and have a good time. The first day on the job I was out where all the fighter pilots trained before they went to Vietnam. An F-105 came in with a hung bomb, it hit the runway, slid down, stopped about 300 yards from my firetruck and blew up. All the windows in my truck blew out and I thought, "This isn't a job I need," but I did it for the rest of my tour. It was a great job being a firefighter. There was a lot of camaraderie. When I was there I figured I'd see the world.



There were people from all walks of life and you'd just have to sort them all out. James Crabel, he's from Guam. He was the best in the world. That is why I volunteered for Thailand. James pulled me out of the back of a B-52.

All the white guys ran. The plane was smoking' and the tail gunner in back of the B-52 got shot up. When we were going in there after the plane came in smoking, I went to get the pilot and engineers out. They told me to go check on the tail gunner. I crawled all the way back through the B-52. I had to crawl in a 2 1/2 X 2 1/2 space for about 160 feet. When I got back there the tail gunner was gone. There is a door they can crawl in and it was blown up. There was a little bit of blood there. His



parachute was gone and he was gone. Then I found out his last name, Cook, he was from Oklahoma. I never found out his first name. They never found him. They don't know where he was. The last thing he told the pilot was, "I got him."

On the back of a B-52 there are four 50-caliber machine guns that are computer controlled. In my opinion, he probably got nervous because of all the smoke in there. What they usually do is put the parachute on and there are two handles you pull that blows the guns away and then you jump. He probably hit that latch that was pressurized and it probably sucked him right out. His parachute was probably still in his hands. That is my opinion. Anyway – I was back there and it

was full of smoke and I was asking for help to get me out. I looked out the window and my crew was sitting back watching because there was smoke rolling out. I asked for help and James Crabel drove up in the patrol truck. He said, "You got to get out." I reached out and pulled the canopies so both guns would fall out. There were about 4 million dollars' worth of guns laying on the tarmac and he pulls up to save me, giving me a way to get out. It's a long way in the air. I was wearing my full fireman gear but I was able to jump out of the plane into his truck.

I was in Indian Springs for a year.

I volunteered to go to U-Tapao Royal Thai Navy Airfield in Thailand.<sup>1</sup> I lived on the U-Tapao base for about two months and then I moved off base where I could have my freedom and didn't have someone tell me my barracks wasn't clean enough. We really had to play the military game on base which I didn't like. I was there to do a job and then went home. My place was about four miles from base. I would ride a baht bus back and forth to the base. A baht bus was a Toyota truck with seats in the back. You'd pay a nickel and they would give you a ride to work. It was like a Thai cab service that stopped outside the base. When I was done I would go outside and grab the baht bus back home.

When I was at U-Tapao we had some zappers come on base. A zapper was someone hired by the North Vietnamese to try to blow up planes. There were B-52's on base and they were bombing North Vietnam really bad. The zappers would try to blow them up for the North Vietnamese. They would cut through the wire fences and they would have satchel charges. They would throw the satchel charges into the engines, but all the satchel charges they had were from WWII and they didn't work. Only one of them went off and it didn't hurt anything. I had one of the zappers run by me and shoot three bullet holes into my firetruck. That made me mad so I tried to run him over but I didn't get him. When you have a big fire truck it is hard to run over anybody.

A pilot on one plane came in with a hung ordinance<sup>2</sup> on it. The pilot radioed the tower about the hung ordinance but the tower didn't tell us. The plane has a rocket hanging on it, sliding down the runway because the landing gear collapsed from being all shot up. Then the plane heats up from sliding on the runway but there were still explosives on the plane. When the plane stopped and we went into fight the fire, the plane went BOOM. Six firefighters died because the tower was too stupid to tell us. If the tower had told us the plane had a hung ordinance then we could have handled it differently and six lives would have been saved.

This one man (Spencer shows me a picture) got killed when a plane blew up. They took him to the American hospital but they said he wasn't an American so they shipped him off base and it was like putting him in a barn. He died, that cute little kid. He was contracted by the fire department and helped us clean up stuff. He was a good dude and he wanted to be an artist. The Americans didn't give him the time of day. I walked out of the fire station with a Wyoming knife that was made to cut the shoulder straps off pilots to get them out. I walked out and cut the

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<sup>1</sup> Approx. 87 miles southeast of Bangkok on the gulf of Thailand.

<sup>2</sup> Hung ordinance refers to such weapons or stores on an aircraft that the pilot has attempted to drop or fire but could not do the same because of a malfunction of the weapon, rack or launcher, or aircraft release and control system.

rope on the American Flag. It is what it is. This young kid died for the Americans and they treated him like shit. They should have left him on base and took care of him.

Some days we would have to go out and fight fires in the elephant grass. It was the weirdest stuff you ever seen in your life. When it was green it would burn like someone poured gas on it. If it was dried out it wouldn't burn. They would also send me out to spray Agent Orange around the perimeter of the base.

There was a base in Da Nang that was hit with rockets and they had lost some firefighters. They wanted some volunteers for replacements. There were four of us that volunteered. Craig Demay, Jim Crabel, and I went to Da Nang for 38 days with another man stationed from the Philippines. They needed the help and I thought, "What the heck, this is a good opportunity." If you went there for over 40 days they would have to give you orders to go, so we just took a flight there and a flight back after 38 days. I done the same thing in Da Nang as in Thailand. The planes would be coming in and if there were any battle damage or anything we would go out and make sure the pilots were safe and get them off the planes. These planes would be smoking when they came in from hydraulic leaks. Once the pilot was out of the plane they might take the plane back and try to rebuild it so it could fly again or if they couldn't do that they would just push it over into a ditch for parts and pieces. A lot of the planes the Thai people would probably take the scrape off and sell it for some extra cash.

When I left Da Nang to go back to U-Tapao I was on a C-130 flying back. There were two U.S. snipers that got on the plane. They were leaving, getting out. They got on the plane with their sniper guns and the crew chief said he wanted their guns. He was told he would die before he took their guns. The guns were going home with them. One had on a black jacket, a bullet proof vest and on the back of the jacket I'll never forget what it said. It said, "As I walked through the valley of the shadow of death, I shall fear no evil, because I'm the evilest mother fucker in this valley." Sorry but that is what it said. He had sewn it on there and wore it in the jungle. He told me that when he walked through the jungle he was the meanest person in the jungle. He said if someone wanted to kill him, he'd kill them first. When I talked to him he just had eyes from hell. They let him keep his gun. No one took it from him. He was getting out and going home. I wondered what it would be like for him to come home after experiencing what he had done.

Da Nang was a pretty stressful place. Rockets would come in every night, every morning, and sometimes all day long. I was thinking, "I really don't need to be here. When my 38 days are up I want to leave." I think it was in March 1972 when I went to Da Nang and after my 38 days I went back to U-Tapao.

Me and Craig Demay from Shelby, Ohio would ride motorcycles all the way around the Island of Thailand. A lot of the places we went the people had never seen Americans. We'd go up to Kata Noi beach in Phuket and rent the motorcycles and we'd take off from there.

Thailand was a very beautiful country. Very gorgeous, lush green, had everything there, and the base was right on the beach so I was out swimming on the beach every chance I could. My job was 24 hours on and 24 hours off. Every two weeks I'd get three days off. They called that your Kelly day. You'd have three days to go do what the heck you wanted. We would usually go up

to Bangkok because you could rent a very plush hotel room for \$25.00 for two nights and enjoy the heck out of it having a good time.

When I was in U-Tapao I tried to volunteer to be a PJ – a para-jumper or medic. It's where you would go out and try to help the wounded. I went and got some training from a guy that was doing that. He was getting ready to leave and told me to go sign up for it. He told me when you sign up for it you sign up for another six years and I'm thinking, "That's eight more years of my life." I liked that job and I would have liked to have done it but I didn't want to spend eight years of my life in the military. I wanted out as soon as I could get out. I was in Thailand twelve months.

Craig Demay and I served together and came back to the United States together. After leaving U-Tapao we both had leave. I was going home before reporting to Seymour Johnson Airforce Base. They flew us into Travis Airforce base in California and then bused us to San Francisco airport. At that time you would get off a plane and walk right down to the gate. You had to wear your military uniform to get the flight discount at the San Francisco airport. We walked into the airport. There were a lot of protestors there. Two women came up and gave us daisies. They asked us where we were at and we told them. After we told them where we had been it got ugly quick. We were called every name in the book and spit on. We had our luggage and after getting our tickets we went into the rest room to change out of our military uniforms into civilian clothes. I was tired of getting spit on. They would follow us right into the restroom. We're thinking, "What the hell did I do?"

Even going off base in North Carolina was the same thing. Civilians treated us like dogs. When we went off base the civilians could tell we were military because you had that stupid haircut. That is the reason I grew my hair long. When I was off base there were no problems because my hair was down over my ears so no one would bother me. If civilians knew you were in the military they would call you baby killers, war mongers, and tell you that you liked killing people. I'm thinking, "Really, why didn't you go. What have you been doing?"

After my leave home, I went to Seymour Johnson Airforce Base in North Carolina. When I was there I was a crew chief. Me and another guy would switch off. One day I'd be a driver and he would be crew chief then the next day I'd be the crew chief and he'd be the driver. I'd never work with white people again. It was all brothers because I could trust them. I was always asked why I never had white people on my truck and I'd tell them, "Because when it gets tight you don't come in. You stay back."

At Seymour they would train jet pilots in the RB-66. These training pilots would do touch and go's all day. Touch and goes would teach new pilots who just got out of college how to fly the planes, how to land them, how to make maneuvers, and how to find their way around following the maps. They just practiced so they would get good at it. They had just learned all this stuff from a book and now they were given a plane and told to go have fun.

One day we were sitting down at the flight line in the fire trucks watching them do touch and goes. One plane came in and he forgot to put his landing gear down. It just got boring doing it all day long. There are alarms that go off in the plane if you get too low. He slapped right into

the runway and slid down the runway. Before the plane even stopped the pilot blew off the canopy and was running down the wing of the plane getting out of there. He had to get the heck away from that plane because it was like a bomb. I got on the radio and told everyone to, "Stop Now! The plane is a bunch of junk and the pilot is out. We'll pick him up." Well, I went to court martial proceedings for that one. I've seen firefighters die fighting those plane fires and I said we were not going in so I stopped my crew. There were four of us on a fire-crew; the crew chief, driver, and two linemen sitting behind you. They told me we had to go in but I asked them why. The pilot is out and we're going to pick him up. That plane is a piece of junk and the Airforce is just going to pick it up and take it to the junk yard. I went before a whole bunch of idiots with stuff on their shoulders. They wanted to know what I did so I explained it to them what had happened. Why kill someone. What would have happened if the fuel tank blew up while we were there fighting the fire? Why risk lives to save a bunch of junk, let it burn. They told me to go have a good day. They said they understood what my thinking was and agreed the plane was just a bunch of junk.

I was at Seymour Johnson Airforce Base for fourteen months. There were so many new Officer Pilots at Seymour Johnson that didn't know too much. You're supposed to salute an Officer with your right hand when you walked by but I'd salute them with my left hand. They knew something was wrong but couldn't figure out what was wrong.

I was a rebel there. For the last six months I never cut my hair. I figured, "What you going to do, send me to Vietnam?" I'd take my hair and put it up under my hat. I'd dippy-do it so it would stay up there then I'd trim around the edges. On my off day I would go down to the PX with my hair all brushed out. This fresh out of school man came out and said, "Are you an Airman?" I said, "Yes I am." He said, "You need a haircut." I said, "I can't afford one. I'm only an Airman 1<sup>st</sup> class." So he gave me \$10 and told me to go get one. I went and bought me a hamburger and three packs of cigarettes. I'd never see him again and I didn't cut my hair.

When you got discharged you'd have to go through and get a bunch of papers signed. When I went to payroll, the guy there told me he wouldn't give me my pay until I went and got a haircut. I said, "I don't care. There's an airbase in Utah and I'll take my paperwork there and he'll pay me. The man said, "You won't be able to get out." I told him, "I've signed a contract for four years. Tonight at midnight my contract is up and I'm going home tomorrow." He ended up paying me. By that time in my life I was just tired of playing the military game. Really tired of it. The next day I got on a commercial flight and went home.

My sister picked me up at the airport when I was discharged. I sat up at the airport for about three hours waiting for someone to come and get me. My dad was mad at me because I hadn't written letters home to mom. But what do you say? Mom wrote to me at least twice a week. But I really don't know what I would have wrote. After two or three months everything was the same thing. I could have Xerox-ed a letter and sent the same thing every week.

When I came home Vern Carson and Ned Carson from Fairfield were the only ones that welcomed me back. They were best friend ever. Others said, "Oh he's back" and they wanted to hear the military stories but I thought, "No, go see it for yourself." I didn't have the same friends

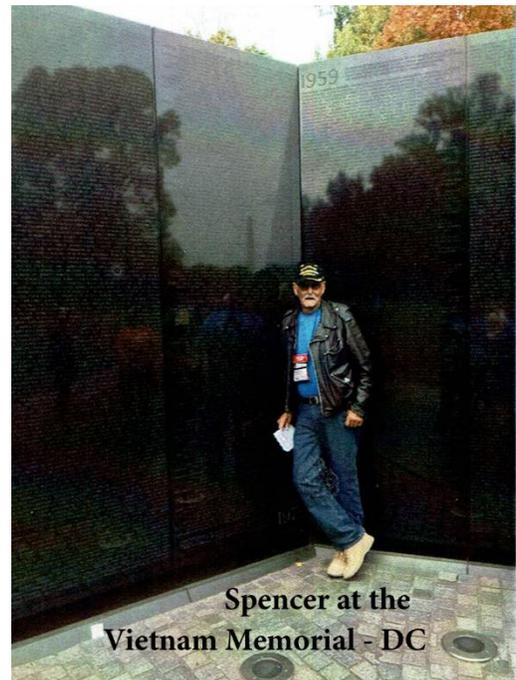
as when I left. I thought I had friends that I hung out in high school with but when I got back they didn't barely talk to me.

Being in the Air Force was a hard shock. Cedar Fort is a little small country town with rednecks from hell and then you go to the big world. It was a hard adjustment being around people from different walks of life. The whole war was over a rubber tree. Fifteen thousand people died so we could have tires on our trucks. Was it worth it? No! The French couldn't take it over so they asked us to come and help and then they left. It was all over a damn rubber tree. That's what that war was all about – a rubber tree!

When all the Iraq stuff started my son was at that age and I told him that people over there were dying for a barrel of oil. Do we need it that bad? I told him, "Don't Go." We have to have war. There are just times we have to do it. But not for stupid reasons. If the American's go over to the Middle East to help in a war, as soon as we leave they will do it again. It won't matter. Those tribes over there have been fighting for thousands of years. We're not going to change anything.

I was always ashamed to say anything to anybody that I served in Vietnam (Spencer gets very emotional) because you always get those feelings. Then about six, maybe seven years ago I said, "Screw it, I did it. Don't come down on me because you didn't want me to do that. I did what I did and I'm proud that I did it and what did you do?" I'll stick up for my military service 110%. I'm no longer ashamed of what I did but I was for a long time. Everybody would say, "Did you go to Vietnam?" and when I said, "Yea" they'd say, "Why did you do something that stupid?" I thought, "Really." Vietnam was really a different war. When I talked to the WWII veteran's they told me when they saw the enemy they would shoot them. In Vietnam we had to call somebody to let us know if we could shoot them. Even when the enemy was shooting at you. A lot of the time we were told to hide.

I had to go out and spray Agent Orange in the jungle in U-Tapao. The V.A. don't give a shit<sup>3</sup>. They told me it wouldn't hurt anybody but I've lost seventeen friends because of it. The V.A. said it is only a weed killer but it killed a lot of my friends. I think they are waiting for me to die before they give me anything. I have a lot of hard feelings about the way the government treats the G.I. They want the Vietnam veterans to die and go away. The



Spencer at the  
Vietnam Memorial - DC

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<sup>3</sup> According to Chisholm, Chisholm, & Kilpatrick LTD, "Although VA recognizes "there was significant use of herbicides" at numerous Thailand military bases, it continues to deny Thailand veterans the presumption of exposure afforded to Vietnam veterans. Due to the density and high growth rate of tropical vegetation in Thailand, the military used herbicides because mowing was seen as labor intensive and ineffective. Furthermore, there are several reference reports admitting herbicide use throughout bases in Thailand. Herbicides were used to control vegetation in Thailand's tropical environment. More specifically, herbicides were used to improve visual observation of the base perimeter.

G.I's. today have lots and lots of support. It's just the way it is.

About seven years ago I bought that hat (Spencer shows me his Vietnam Vet hat). My daughter signed me up for the Honor Flight and we went back to Washington D.C. in November 2018. When we went back and got out to change planes, everyone stopped and saluted us. Everyone quit what they were doing, came out, clapped, and cheered. It was pretty wild. It was like the homecoming I didn't get when I came home.

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According to the Selective Service System "A lottery drawing – the first since 1942 – was held on December 1, 1969, at Selective Service National Headquarters in Washington, D.C. This event determined the order of call for induction during calendar year 1970; that is, for registrants born between January 1, 1944, and December 31, 1950.

Each table shows all the birth dates in a given year and the lottery numbers assigned to those dates. Read the tables like a multiplication table. At the top of the table are the months of the year. In the first column, on the far left, are the dates of the month. The numbers in the center represent lottery numbers. Thus, the tabular format is set up to show the random selection sequence, by month and day."

**SELECTIVE SERVICE SYSTEM  
1970 RANDOM SELECTION SEQUENCE, BY MONTH AND DAY**

	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec
1	305	086	108	032	330	249	093	111	225	359	019	129
2	159	144	029	271	298	228	350	045	161	125	034	328
3	251	297	267	083	040	301	115	261	049	244	348	157
4	215	210	275	081	276	020	279	145	232	202	266	165
5	101	214	293	269	364	028	188	054	082	024	310	056
6	224	347	139	253	155	110	327	114	006	087	076	010
7	306	091	122	147	035	085	050	168	008	234	051	012
8	199	181	213	312	321	366	013	048	184	283	097	105
9	194	338	317	219	197	335	277	106	263	342	080	043
10	325	216	323	218	065	206	284	021	071	220	282	041
11	329	150	136	014	037	134	248	324	158	237	046	039
12	221	068	300	346	133	272	015	142	242	072	066	314
13	318	152	259	124	295	069	042	307	175	138	126	163
14	238	004	354	231	178	356	331	198	001	294	127	026
15	017	089	169	273	130	180	322	102	113	171	131	320
16	121	212	166	148	055	274	120	044	207	254	107	096
17	235	189	033	260	112	073	098	154	255	288	143	304
18	140	292	332	090	278	341	190	141	246	005	146	128
19	058	025	200	336	075	104	227	311	177	241	203	240
20	280	302	239	345	183	360	187	344	063	192	185	135
21	186	363	334	062	250	060	027	291	204	243	156	070
22	337	290	265	316	326	247	153	339	160	117	009	053
23	118	057	256	252	319	109	172	116	119	201	182	162
24	059	236	258	002	031	358	023	036	195	196	230	095
25	052	179	343	351	361	137	067	286	149	176	132	084
26	092	365	170	340	357	022	303	245	018	007	309	173
27	355	205	268	074	296	064	289	352	233	264	047	078
28	077	299	223	262	308	222	088	167	257	094	281	123
29	349	285	362	191	226	353	270	061	151	229	099	016
30	164	----	217	208	103	209	287	333	315	038	174	003
31	211	----	030	----	313	----	193	011	----	079	----	100