

A Veterans Oral History

Les Bakke

[2007]

Heritage Education Commission
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In 2000, Bev Paulson, Heritage Education Commission member, developed a plan to record Veterans' oral histories, starting with WW II Veterans. Bev made a significant personal donation to start our Veterans' oral history project which was supplemented by other concerned individuals, we have recorded 65 oral histories of WWII veterans plus a few Korean War and Vietnam War Veteran. The project is ongoing.

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Interviewee: Les Bakke (LB)

Interviewer: Linda Jenson (LJ)

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Les Bakke Biography

Les Bakke was born in Thief River Falls, MN and graduated from Newfolden High School, MN. Les enlisted in the Air Force in 1964 and was trained as a Russian linguist and intelligence analyst. Les served in Missawa, Japan and Ft. Meade, MD. After leaving the Air Force, Les enrolled at Minnesota State University Moorhead and received undergraduate degrees in computer science and intercultural studies. Les later earned a master's degree in guidance and counseling. Les is the computer center director at MSU Moorhead.

Transcription

LB: My name is Les Bakke.

LJ: Les, where were you born?

LB: I was born in northern Minnesota, in a small town of Newfolden. It's about 17-18 miles north, northwest of Thief River Falls, Minnesota, in Marshall County.

LJ: How big of a town?

LB: We had give or take 300 people in the town most of the time. Every time somebody was born, somebody left.

LJ: Evened out, huh?

LB: It evened itself out.

LJ: Did you go to school there?

LB: I went to school at, then, Newfolden High School. It's now Marshall County Central High School. It merged as lots of schools did in the 80's, I think, is when they merged.

LJ: Now, who are your parents?

LB: My parents? My dad's name is Adolph Bakke. His parents emigrated from Norway back in the 1880's, 1886, and they came from a little town called Fåvang, Norway, which is about 60-70 miles north of Lillehammer. My mother's parents came from Germany about the same time. I think they came a little later, about a year or two later, but they were all back in the mid 1880's, they came to this country.

LJ: What was your mother's name?

LB: My mother's name was Gast.

LJ: What did your father and mother do for a living?

LB: He was a farmer. He was a typical farmer up in the northern part of Minnesota where, you know, he had small grain. He had corn and hay. He had sheep. He had pigs. He had chickens. He had cows. He had horses and everything else. I got my share of milking and plowing and shocking and stacking hay and all the other good things.

LJ: Okay. Did you go to high school in Newfolden, too?

LB: Yes, yes, all twelve years. We didn't have kindergarten, of course. I went all twelve years there. Graduated in 1963.

LJ: After high school did you go right on to college?

LB: Yeah, as a matter of fact, I went to a year's worth of college at, then, Moorhead State College, right down here in Moorhead. I arrived as a history major. I wanted to be a history teacher in high school when I got done with college. However, when I got here, they were giving all the new freshmen math tests for placement into various math courses. We're doing that again here now, but back then they were doing it, and I was one of two students that evidently passed the math test so they put me in calculus as a brand new freshman from a little town in Newfolden of 300. We had 37 in our graduating class. I didn't know any better, so there I was sitting in a class with all sorts of sophomores and, at the end of the second quarter, when I was finishing the second quarter of calculus I decided, "Hey, maybe they know more than I do," so I changed and became a math major. But I finished the year's worth of college and decided in June, I guess it was, that I didn't have enough money and a variety of other reasons, I decided to enlist in the Air Force.

LJ: So where did you go for basic training?

LB: Basic training? We went to Lackland Air Force Base, which is located in San Antonio, Texas. We left here on the 23rd of July of '64. Flew out of Fargo. Flew down to Dallas and then, if I remember right, we transferred planes in Dallas and flew to San Antonio. They picked us up there with a bus. Took us to the base and, of course, at the base, you've heard some of these stories before, but they take you in and shave your hair off and do this and do that and run you ragged and, about one o'clock, they sent us to the barracks so we could sleep and at five o'clock they wake us up again and start all over, so I do remember thinking before I went to sleep that first night, you know, "What the heck did I do to myself?" But then the second thought immediately following was, "Hey, there have been hundreds of thousands of other people that have gone through this or worse. They're no better than I am. I can do it too."

LJ: How long was basic training back then?

LB: Basic training, if I remember right, was about ten weeks long. Just about two months and, of course, I was smart enough to enlist in the middle of July. Go to Texas in the middle of July, yes, it was hot! But, the fact that I had participated in athletics in high school and other things and worked all my young life outside on the farm, whatever, I was in reasonably good shape and the heat then didn't bother me. The exercise didn't bother me. Some of the city kids, of course, it bothered them. Most of the farm boys, heck, we were used to it.

LJ: Tough.

LB: Not necessarily tough, just used to it. Yeah. It was more manual labor farming in the '60s.

LJ: Any special memories stick out from boot camp?

LB: Basic training. Basic training is what the Air Force calls it, not boot camp but, nothing, nothing in particular. The one thing that was interesting before I left Fargo. There was a sergeant with the Air Force who came into the group of people who were going into the military and said, "Who's the guy here going into the Air Force?" And I said, "Well, I am." "Come with me," he said. So we went to his office and he said, "You're the only one going into the Air Force; there's no need for you to sit there with all the draftees and stuff like that. You come in here while we're waiting to ship you out and we can talk." The best thing that he ever did, he told me about something called a Defense Language Institute program that when I got down to Lackland and was in basic training, they would give us an exam test to see how adaptable we were to learning foreign languages. He said, "If you get into that program, they'll send you to college for a year." I said, "Cool. That's good." I was going to go into electronics, you know, mathematics and electronics, they were all pretty much the same. So I knew about this language program. We got there and, sure enough, all of the people that had a year's worth of college were given the Language Aptitude Test. I tried really hard and, apparently, I passed it because when I left basic training, my orders were to go to language school at the University of Indiana, in Bloomington, Indiana. So I hopped a train. No, I paid for a ticket.

Got on a train out of Texas and went first to New Orleans and I spent a couple of days in New Orleans on the way to Bloomington, Indiana. So I got to see that part of the country, and then I arrived at Bloomington, Indiana, and there was another sort of shock awaiting at the Language Institute in Bloomington because all of our instructors were native Russians who spoke very, very, very little English. Our instruction was in Russian, of the Russian language. So we walked in the first day of class and they said, “здрасвете,” and other Russian words and we were sitting there saying, “Uh oh.” But it was a great experience. Really a great experience! Wouldn’t trade it for anything.

LJ: How long was the language program?

LB: I was there for ten months. It was a ten-month program. They immersed us in Russian. We were in class six hours a day. If we didn’t have 80% or better on the exams, we had two hours of required study hall every night, so it was a full-time job. Even without the required study hall, we’d spend 8-10 hours learning the Russian language. So we learned it pretty well. The best part about it, of course, is we were in the military, so we were on payroll. We got paid every month. Okay. Room, board paid for by the federal taxpayers and we were on a college campus. I still believe there’s a no better place in the world than sitting on a college campus. Because, you know, single young men, there were a lot of single young women around and any other military installation, any other training that one would go to, that wouldn’t be the case. So it was a great, great base to be stationed and we got to figure out what we were doing. I was in the Russian program so we all figured out that we would be listening to the Russian broadcasts and analyzing and reporting and so forth and so on because no one told us that it was true, no one told us that it was false. When we finished our language program, we went down to a base in San Angelo, Texas, Goodfellow Air Force Base. There we went through an intelligence program. The first thing they told us in the intelligence program is that you cannot tell anyone what you are doing down here. Of course, we had been telling people for the last ten months that we’re going to be Russian spies and everything else and they’d ask us how the Russian spy business was going and we said, “We can’t talk about it.” But it was really true. They’re very, very, very security conscious at Goodfellow. I went through the Russian intercept course down there where we learned the military part of the Russian language and what we had to listen for and everything else. Then, when we finished that program, there was an opportunity to get training in military intelligence. So I went to that program. So I was in school almost two years before I went to work. Not bad! Not bad.

LJ: So after the training in San Angelo, where did you get orders to?

LB: Now that’s really an interesting little story! One of the things that happened down in San Angelo at Goodfellow is I found this program called the Airman’s Education and Commissioning program. If you had at least a year’s worth of college and, by then I had two - the one in Indiana and the one in Moorhead. If you had at least a year’s worth of college, you could apply for this program where the Air Force would send you to college, finish your degree, send you to Officer Candidate School, become an officer, and at the end of that you had to sign up for an additional four years. Well, the good things about it were, of course, that I got to go school, they’d

pay me to go school, they'd pay tuition, room, board, books, everything, so I said, "Shoot, that's a good deal!" So I applied for it and I was approved to go into the program. The only restriction was you had to apply from a permanent duty station. You couldn't apply from a training institution, and Goodfellow was a training school. So when we got our dream sheets, the dream sheets are those things you fill out where you want to go to serve your active duty. Part of the rules of the commissioning program was that you had to serve half of your permanent duty station months. So I picked all the shortest months in the world. There were some duty stations that were 12 months long, so I picked all of them; such exotic places as Trabzon, Turkey, and Shemya, Alaska, and some place in Pakistan and everything else; and I sent those in. Other people were applying for Germany, Italy, England, you know, the nice places. Well, when we got our orders, most of the people got Okinawa; the Philippines. A couple got Vietnam; at that time this was in 1966, so Vietnam was pretty strong. I got orders to Hickam Field, Hawaii, 36 months.

LJ: Tough job.

LB: Yeah! Stateside, you know? You didn't even need to have to take shots to go Hickam Field, Hawaii. So I went home on leave. I said, "Well, you know, this isn't what I really wanted, I have to wait a year and a half to go into this program from Hickam, but I guess I can take Hawaii for a year and a half." And then about a week before I was to fly over there I got a telegram in the mail and I still have the telegram at home. Your orders have been changed from Hickam Field, Hawaii, to Misawa, Japan. Well, I didn't care for that a whole bunch, but it was only two years long and I said, "That's no problem, I can serve a year anywhere." And I got out to Travis Air Force Base to fly over to Japan and, of course, I didn't have any shots because I was going to Hawaii and you don't need shots to go to Hawaii. So, I had three in the left arm and two in the right arm all at the same time and, yeah, I got sort of ill. Then, we got on the plane and flew up to Anchorage and then over to Tokyo and then on up north to Misawa. Got off the plane in Misawa and it smelled like fish. I was not the happiest young man about the whole chain of events. So, a week or so later, I got a call from the education officer over there to come in and fill out the paperwork for the commissioning program and everything else, and I went over there and I said, "Forget it." Don't want to stay in the Air Force any longer than my remaining two years. "Why not? Do you know what you're throwing away?" I said, "No, I'm not throwing it away. I want a little control over my life. I don't want somebody else sending me a telegram then saying your next twelve months are going to be here and not there." And it just wasn't for me. So I served my four years, actually three years, eleven months, three weeks and a day, but nobody counted.

LJ: So it was basically in Japan, then?

LB: I served in Misawa, Japan, and actually I really did enjoy it. I enjoyed being over there. I worked as an intelligence analyst for most of the time. I did a little bit of Russian intercept language and transcriptions and those kinds of things, but it was mostly analyzing the traffic that we copied. We copied voice traffic. We copied Morse code traffic and other kinds of military communications from the, then, Soviet Union. I enjoyed the heck out of it! The job was wonderful! Serving in the

military, it was okay. I got to see Japan, traveled in the northern part of Japan all over. Went skiing. Went up to the northern island. I did some volunteer English teaching in the junior high over there. I really had a good time. I got to be pretty good at ping-pong, table tennis. That's a sport the Japanese really love, or they did back then. And these little kids at the junior high would just line up at noon hour to play "the American" at ping-pong! They had a great time. Some of them were really, really good. We had some good battles. Then they'd want me to play basketball. Of course, I'm not that tall but I was about a foot taller than any of them. They had the rim down low so I could almost dunk the ball. I had a good time. Bought a motorcycle while I was over there so I could get around the countryside; did those kinds of things.

LJ: No doubt it had to have been a better tour of duty than what most people were doing at that time, going to Vietnam?

LB: It was far better duty than Vietnam, that is true. I did, however, about halfway through my two years in Japan, volunteer to go to Nam. They had openings for intelligent analysts down there. There are still times I kind of wish I'd gone. I know it sounds strange to most people; you would want to volunteer to go to a war zone. But, you got to remember that I was not a frontline infantryman, you know. I would've been stationed in Seoul or some relatively safe location in Vietnam. I would not have been out in the firefights or anything like that but, even so, it could've been dangerous, I guess. They'd give you extra pay to go, you know.

LJ: But they elected to keep you in Japan?

LB: I think my NCO, the guy I worked for, and I do not remember his name. He was really one of the best people I ever met in the military, had something to say, "This guy thinks he wants to go, but nah, I don't think he wants to." Just one of those things that young men do.

LJ: So your time in Japan, did you have a lot of regular colleagues you worked with or were you basically on your own?

LB: Oh no, no. We were on duty 365 days a year, 24 hours a day. We worked in three shifts. A day shift, a swing shift and a mid-shift. There must have been a hundred people or more on each shift, probably about 120. I think there was near 400 stationed in the little wing that we were in. We were in the security wing, which was on the base at Misawa, Japan, but it was quite a ways away from everything else. We had big antennas there so we could capture Russian broadcasts and so forth. And we were a 24-hour-a-day operation, every day of the year. The main base, the other part of the base, was not. They were, you know, more of a normal operation during the day and, for the most part, they shut down at night. But we had to go through the main base to get to the city of Misawa, where all the bars were and all the other places of entertainment. That's all we have to say about that. Anyway, we had to go through the main base to get there. When I was over there in 1967, when the U.S.S. Pueblo was captured. The Navy spy ship that was captured by the North Koreans. And it was picked up in, there is still a lot of debate whether it was international waters or Russian, not Russian but Korean territorial waters where the boat was captured or not, but it was close. It may have been on one side, it may

have been on the other side; it was really, really close. Anyway, I was over there when that boat was captured. And, of course, the main base went on full alert, which means that the folks on the main base could not go off base. Well, we in the security wing were 24 hours anyhow; it didn't really matter, so we could go off base. So we'd go on the bus through the entire main base, out through the gates, go to the bar, have a drink or more, then come back in; and it just got the people on the main base very, very upset. Because, "Who do you think you are? We can't go down there. How come you can?" Those kinds of things.

LJ: Interesting. Did you talk to any of the people you worked with? Kept in contact?

LB: Oh, I had some good friends. Actually, my best friends were those that I met in language school and went on down to Texas with me. But I haven't communicated with them in many, many, many years. A very good friend, Bill Querin, was from a little town just outside of Cleveland, Ohio. We were stationed at Bloomington, Indiana, so one long weekend, we hitchhiked from Bloomington up to Cleveland and stayed at his parents' house, and went goofing around Cleveland and the area. First time I'd ever been to a real amusement park. They had one just outside of Cleveland. It was kind of fun.

LJ: What did you do after you left the military?

LB: Well, actually, when I was ready to leave Japan, it was in April, if I remember right, and I was due to get out in July. Normally, if you are within three months of discharge, they just discharge you when your tour is done. Well for some reason or another, they decided they weren't doing that anymore. I didn't particularly want to stay in Japan any longer so I extended for three months, which meant that I had six months left. If you had six months left, they sent you to another duty site. And this whole thing doesn't make any sense at all because it was so cost ineffective, it's unbelievable. But I extended for three months and I got orders to go to Fort Meade, Maryland, which is located between Baltimore and Washington, DC, and that's the head of the National Security Agency. A lot of people have never heard of the National Security Agency but it supervises nearly all military intelligence from all branches of the military: Army, Navy, Marines, Air Force, so forth. So I got orders to go there. I flew back to Travis Air Force Base. I'm going to digress here a little bit, to Travis Air Force Base out in California and on the plane back, I met a guy who was returning from the U. S. Army post in Korea. So we flew basically overnight and got to Travis in the morning. We did our processing. It got to out about one o'clock so one of us suggested we go to the NCO club and have a couple of drinks. That sounded like a good deal. So we sat there and swapped tall tales and lies and everything else. Then one of us decided that it might be good to go downtown San Francisco and see if we could get into a dialogue with some of the hippies down there. Remember this is 1968, okay. There was sort of an anti-war sentiment in the United States.

LJ: Absolutely.

LB: Particularly in San Francisco.

LJ: Yes, that was the capitol.

LB: So we did! He and I went down to the area of San Francisco and we went to one of the hippie bars and I got to say they were so nice. They saw two somewhat intoxicated military people, I mean we were still in uniform, come in there. "I want to argue the war with some hippies." "That's okay, that's okay. We love you." That kind of stuff. And I think we stayed there for a little while and finally we calmed down, I guess, and then we hailed a cab and asked him to take us to a nice medium bar so we could see some round-eyed women. In your interviews, you may have heard that before.

LJ: Round-eyed?

LB: Round-eyed, oriental; oriental women.

LJ: Oh, no you're the first to tell me that, Les.

LB: Okay. Round-eyed. It was a phrased used. So we got a cab and told the cabby what we wanted and he thought he was doing us a real favor, I guess, because we just told him we wanted to go to a nice bar. He took us to an oriental bar. This guy from the Army had just left Korea and I had just left Japan. We said, "What the heck." Our night is shot anyhow, so we went in there and talked with them. It happened to be a Japanese bar, so, had a good time. Then I went to -- I went home on leave. Then I went to Fort Meade, Maryland. And, just to show you that sometimes the military doesn't know exactly what it's doing, they had a program that you could get out early if you were going to college. See, I'd extended for three months, which took me from the end of July til the end of October. So, I wrote a letter to Moorhead State College. You had to have a letter of acceptance in order to get into this program. So I wrote a letter to Moorhead State College, at the time, asking if I could return for second summer session, which would've been the middle of July. Okay? And I'd also been accepted out at Western Washington State in Bellingham, Washington, so I sent them a letter. I figured one of them was going to get back to me and I said the first one that gets it back to me, I'm going to turn that one in and apply for an early out. Well, Moorhead replied about a day and a half or two days ahead of Bellingham, Washington, so I turned it in and I actually got out on the 15th of July, when normally I would have gotten out on the 22nd of July and I guess the rest is history. So, me extending for three months, actually allowed me to get out a week early, and, and, the best part was that I got to spend a couple of months out at Fort Meade, Maryland, and was able to go to Washington, DC and play tourist. I don't know if there is a better place to be a tourist than Washington, DC. Especially if you've got a history background. I love that stuff. It is a great place to go. Then I came back to Moorhead State, enrolled in second summer session classes as I had to and enrolled in fall. People getting out of the military, at least back then, probably should not get out and go directly to college. They ought to take a month and recover, or relax, or whatever you want to call it. So, at the end of fall quarter, my mind was shot, and so was I, so I took almost a year off. I took winter term, spring term, and summer off and re-enrolled the following fall. I enrolled as a math major. I was on a college campus from '68 until '72 as a student. Lots of interesting things going on in the country back then, including the Vietnam War and the Democratic Convention in Chicago where they had riots and all sorts of things. Martin Luther King being shot. Bobby Kennedy being shot. George

Wallace being shot. I actually heard George Wallace when I was at Fort Meade, Maryland. George Wallace was a bigot and a racist and there was no doubt about it and he was speaking at some place. So this other guy and I said, "Let's go listen to him." So we went down there to listen to him. And the guy was, he was what people said he was. And that's the way he preached. There was a big following that listened to him. We couldn't believe it! We sat there and shook our heads saying "No way! He can't be doing this."

LJ: So by '72, did you also have your master's degree?

LB: No, no I got my baccalaureate in '72. In 1970, I was three classes short of a math degree when I took my first computer class. I'm still two classes short of a math degree. Computers were so interesting and so wonderful back in 1970 when I took the first one. That's what I got my degree in, in 1972. I was involved in various campus activities. I was with student advisers. I was in Student Government and a variety of other things. Through that I was able to meet some folks and there was a position opened for what they call, a veterans service officer. I was a counselor for the GI Bill for the veterans going to school. Bob McCloud, who was then Vice President of Student Affairs, told me about it and suggested that I apply. I was on the Student Senate at the time and he was the adviser. And I did and was hired the fall of '72, when I graduated. So I was the GI Bill counselor for my first four or five years. We had, I think the highest we ever had was 580 some GI Bill students on campus. I've done the GI Bill ever since. I worked in the Registrar's Office as an assistant registrar for a while. Then in 1985, I think it was, I was appointed computer director of the new Computer Center that was just formed back then. That's what I've been doing since.

LJ: When was it that you obtained your master's degree?

LB: Oh yeah, that was about 1975 when I got a master's degree in counseling.

LJ: From MSU?

LB: From MS. Yep, and then I took about a third, I guess, of the MBA courses, master's in business administration. In a supervisory position, you need to know that sort of stuff. Good for you to know.

LJ: Great. What are your thoughts about the war we're fighting now?

LB: Talking about the war in Afghanistan, just in case people listening to this 5-10 years from now don't know what war we're talking about. Is it appropriate? Sure it is. I think there is ample evidence that the Al Qaeda group and bin Laden and his people were behind the terrorist attack on New York and the Pentagon. I think it is valid. Whether more ex-military people would say it's valid than social workers would, for instance. I'm not picking on social workers, but there's a slightly different background and different perspective and everything else.

LJ: Do you have any final thoughts about your time in the military?

LB: The greatest experience that any young man from Newfolden could ever have had. As I've told other people, a mixed marriage in Newfolden was one branch of the Lutheran church marrying another branch of the Lutheran church, because we are

all Scandinavian Lutherans up there, except for a few German Lutherans, but we were all the same. There was no doubt, we were all the same. I got to Lackland Air Force Base basic training, we had a black man for a drill instructor. We had people from all over the country in our barracks. You were sleeping feet apart and everything else and, frankly, it didn't matter. And that was really good for anyone in a small town, who has never had any exposure to anything, to go through. The other thing really good about it is I found the education system in Newfolden, if one were willing enough to work at it, was excellent. My math teacher, my high school math teacher, I still say, was probably the best teacher I've had. I remember coming home from college my freshman year at Christmastime and she called and wanted me to come in and talk about what I was learning in math because she'd heard I was in calculus. I found out that she had never even taken calculus. That was back when you only needed two years of college to teach. At the end of my freshman year, I knew more math than my high school math teacher. It was a real shock! But she taught us everything she knew and you could tell by the way she was asking me questions; she wanted to know this so that she could pass it onto her current high school senior class. So, that was really good. In going into the military, you find out that upper Midwest folks are very competitive, good backgrounds, and everything else. People are just people. There are good folks that come from New York and Los Angeles. There are jerks that come from New York and Los Angeles, just like there are out in Minnesota. It doesn't matter what color, what race, what gender. There are good folks and there are not so good folks.

LJ: Yeah, exactly. Les, how would you like to be remembered?

LB: I knew you were going to ask that one. I got it ready.

LJ: That's good.

LB: That I made a difference. Working in a college environment, I think is probably the best place where you can make a difference. As I tell other folks that ask why do you like working there, I say, "There is no place that I know of that every fall we get 2,000 new people that walk in the door and their objective is to learn something." They're great! They ask good questions! They may be the same questions that were asked last year, but they ask good questions. They think. They don't come around and say, "Well, we've never done it that way before. We couldn't possible change to that method." They're open, they're willing. Great environment.

LJ: Thank you. Thank you very much.

LB: You bet.