



JOHN A. GREENING

KOREAN WAR AIR FORCE VETERAN



Wisconsin Veterans Museum Collection

John A. Greening at a B-29 flight engineer panel position.

July 27, 2018 | By Chris Bucher

John Greening was told at an early age that he couldn't accomplish his dreams. But through strong will and dedication, he thrived to success.

Greening, a U.S. Air Force and Korean War Veteran, was interviewed in 1997 by the Wisconsin Veterans Museum as part of its Oral Histories Collection. He reminisced at length during the interview on the 28 missions he flew, and what it meant to find out the war was over July 27, 1953.

"Going into the service was the biggest advance in my life," he said.

Born and raised in Michigan, Greening always had an interest in aviation. As a child, he built a huge collection of aircraft fliers and had a goal of someday sitting in the cockpit of a plane. But an asthma diagnosis put his dreams in jeopardy.

Around 1946, Greening and his family moved from Michigan to the northeast side of Madison, Wisconsin. After graduating from high school a couple years later, Greening said he decided to enlist in the Air Force. But his asthmatic history paired with poor vision led him to believe he didn't stand a chance at being accepted.

"I was always told, 'You can't do this,' 'You can't do that,'" Greening said during the interview. "It just

gave me momentum to really work on it and achieve things for my own satisfaction."

To Greening's surprise, he was accepted by the Air Force and officially enlisted. It was off to basic training at a former Navy base in Geneva, New York and then to survival training in Reno, Nevada. He was trained as a waist gunner alongside a crew of 11 other comrades in the 20th AF, 93rd Bomb Squadron, 19th Bomb Group.

"We were trained that we were as good as or better than the other people," he said. "We never bragged in front of the other people that we were better than them, but we knew that we could stand up to anybody and equal them, and it helped tremendously."

Greening experienced many things during his service, including being one of the first to experience the racial integration of the military. His first time encountering tensions with the integration was when he and members of his unit went on a trip to eastern Colorado during training. Two black comrades were kicked out of a restaurant they were eating at because of their skin color, and Greening said he stood up for them, exiting the restaurant and scolding the management.

"We're a team, we're part of the Air Force," he said. "This is an Air Force journey."



Wisconsin Veterans Museum Collection

LEFT: Greening and fellow servicemen at Kasuga Officer's Club in Japan, 1953. **RIGHT:** John Greening (center front) poses with his crew in front of their B-29 in Okinawa. Photograph dated December 31, 1952.

After completing training, Greening flew to Korea and was stationed at Kadena Air Base in Okinawa, Japan. His unit served during Christmas and New Years Day 1953, a period he called one of the most intense times of the war.

During one of his missions, Greening said he noticed a ball of flames in the distance. As his B-29 - which he described as the "Cadillac of the Air" - approached, it got caught in searchlights. Strong enemy fire from MIG-15 fighter planes ensued.

"Anybody who's been in a combat situation who says it's calming or that they were never upset or that they never prayed to the Lord, they're lying or they're insane," Greening said. "They're probably lying because you can't possibly be calm —I would never fly with somebody in a stressed situation if they were completely cool."

A few months later, Greening was on board an aircraft when it was struck mid-air by anti-aircraft fire from the ground. He collapsed to the floor and his crew thought he'd been hit. Luckily, he wasn't injured, but his oxygen system had a hole in it. After landing, the crew discovered an anti-aircraft shell sticking through the bottom of the plane.

"Why it didn't go off, I have no idea," he said.

Greening arrived back home in April 1953, about three months prior to the Korean War Armistice being signed. He was reassigned to Savannah, Georgia to fulfill his four-year enlistment. But he didn't have an opportunity to fly or feel that he was meaningfully employed, saying that he felt "cheated" out of a higher-grade commission.

"We never bragged in front of the other people that we were better than them, but we knew that we could stand up to anybody and equal them, and it helped tremendously."

Greening was released from his four-year commitment with the consideration of combat time served and a personal necessity. He later joined the Reserve in 1955 and completed his education. He graduated with an associate's degree in business administration from Port Huron Junior College.

After graduating, Greening spent time racing sports cars, working with his father before getting a job at Diamond Crystal. At the time of his 1997 interview with the Veterans Museum, he was a resident of Oregon, Wisconsin.

Greening's story is one of more than 2,000 readily available in the Wisconsin Veterans Museum's Oral History Collection. Interviews contain the personal stories and military experiences of Wisconsin connected Veterans of World War I to the present day. To access the collection, visit <http://bit.ly/WVMOraHistory>.