

## Preface

**T**his book is mostly for my children, Jennifer and Jason, as well as their spouses and their children. Hopefully they'll learn a little more about their mother and me.

Some of the tales they might recall, while others may sound like they're about someone else.

I call this a love story—not because I wanted to write some steamy romance novel but rather I wanted to tell a simple story of two people trying to make it through life together.

It would be wrong to assume Lillian and I made sacrifices while our kids lived a life of luxury—far from it. This is not a lecture or sermon. There will be no words of advice that my children probably wouldn't take anyway. This is not a marriage how-to book. Lillian and I are still trying to figure that out. I also hope these tales don't embarrass my kids too much. Speaking of oneself is revealing and personal. Our pride in our children overrides just a small bit of their privacy.

It's a terrible thing when your memory fails. You lose your keys, your wallet, and sometimes your spouse. I want to capture these stories while I still can.

In 2020 my father passed away due to complications of dementia. At first, being forgetful is frustrating and difficult for both the person and those closest to them. As the disease advances, you accept being forgetful and are increasingly thankful for any and all assistance. Toward the end, you lose understanding of who you are and just blindly comply.

My dad's journey of memory loss took several years. My mother noticed it far before any of my brothers or sisters. The last two years were painful and sad to watch.

A common condition among dementia sufferers is called sundowner's syndrome. Your normal circadian rhythm flips upside down. You sleep all day and are up all night. Fortunately, my father wasn't a wanderer. At least that wasn't much of a concern.

We've all heard stories of sufferers leaving home and turning up someplace miles away. Primary caregivers for a terminally ill loved one experience physical and emotional exhaustion. In my father's last several months, we hired a night nurse a few days a week. After my mom had a series of heart attacks, my parents moved into an assisted living facility close to their home that offered around-the-clock support.

Dementia robs you first of your mind, then your body. And finally, it takes your soul. Rest well, Father. We'll meet again. But when we do, there's a chance neither of us will know it.

My parents worshiped at the altar of *Jeopardy!* Every evening after dinner they settled in for a twenty-six-minute test of random knowledge and their memory. From where did all their knowledge come? Maybe it was the *World Book Encyclopedia* my dad used to sell when I was young.



**Jennifer and Jason  
in Omaha, Nebraska, 1981**

We had a set at home. My father started on volume A and continued reading each volume until he finished them all. I, on the other hand, used the semitranslucent drawings of the human body to gain meaningful knowledge. After all, a teenage boy's mind does wander. Much of my homework was lifted directly from my dad's encyclopedia. Lucky for me, all my teachers used the *Encyclopedia Britannica*.

With my likely future mental decline, I wrote down a few stories from my checkered past. My bride remains the stoic rock who has anchored me my whole life. Jennifer and Jason grew into wonderful adults, married loving and caring spouses, and gave us two amazing grandsons. Xander and Sebastian are sticky hoodlums, for sure. I hope these stories are not too embarrassing for the guilty and provide some humor for your day.

These stories all started out true. They get truer as the years go by.



**Lowell Frank Zelinski, May 12,  
1933–October 26, 2020**



**Xander Grayson and Sebastian Anthony in Seattle, Washington**

## Joining the Air Force (1973–74)

I'm spending a bit of space here on our early years, the time after Lillian and I finished high school and our first few years in the Air Force.

Lillian and I grew up less than a mile apart in Southern California's San Fernando Valley. A few days after our wedding, we drove away from our childhood homes. Although we kept in touch with family and friends the best we could, it wasn't much. Once you leave your loved ones, your shared experiences diminish, and conversations quickly drift into pleasantries. Soon pleasantries drift into polite discussions of the current weather forecast. At that point, phone calls fade and long-distance bills subside. I guess everyone who moves away experiences the same feeling of loss. Life and people move on; you have your own world, and you no longer belong in theirs.

I promise not to dwell too long on the stories we often retell to each other. Well, maybe just an anecdote or two to cement my kids' particularly embarrassing adventures.

After Jennifer was born, I took to calling Lillian "Mom." I was so proud of my wife, and it was my way of reminding her of that every day. By the time Jason was born, I looked at Lillian and said "Mom"

again and again. But over the years, I've also found it helpful to maintain a healthy distance when talking about her. So when these stories go south, and they most certainly will, I'll just blame it on poetic license, or better yet, someone else.

Before I get into my time in the Air Force, a series of my life's anecdotes wouldn't be complete without a little about Lillian and me. In many ways, our story is the world's most uninteresting story. We first met in Mr. Caruso's seventh-grade history class. We weren't allowed to date until we were out of high school. Then we got married. Maybe I left out a few details, but that's our story. As of November 4, 2025, we have been married for fifty-one years. If you add the years before that, beginning when we met and turned twelve, that makes for a long time.

Lillian's great-uncle Karl lived to be 102. He was the wise one everyone looked up to. He built, lost, and built again multiple family fortunes. He ended his days in Southern California, but his heart and fortune remained in Slovenia and Yugoslavia. When I met him, his English wasn't very good, but his heart was huge, and his eyes could see around corners. He knew how to read people. He seemed to know things before they happened. When Lillian turned sixteen, he predicted our marriage with a gift of a book called *Three to Get Married*. Lillian's parents didn't know what to say but were sure he



**Lillian, John H. Francis Polytechnic  
High School graduation, 1974**



**Uncle Karl Jordan, 1972**

was wrong. I wish I could go back and talk to Uncle Karl. I'd tell him that I knew it too.

I think all family discussions about going into the military roughly go the same. It was the fall of 1973, and the Vietnam War was coming to an end. Even with the end in sight, all males needed to register with the Selective Service. My older brother and I were required to sign up for the draft. We and our parents were keenly aware of the divisions across the country. As a family, we were divided in our opinions as well.

Who cares about opinions, anyway? If the draft's bingo drum drops your number, you go. It was just that simple. Thanks for your opinion. Didn't win? Tune in next week. Bring your number. Best of luck.

As a high school track star who wasn't fast enough for a scholarship and whose C+ average was too low to get into most colleges, I didn't

have many options. Paying for college on my own wasn't possible, but I knew I wanted to go to college. I also wanted to get married and be independent. What kind of job could I get? My only experience was cooking fries at McDonald's.

Then, at the beginning of our senior year, the recruiting van appeared.

With the fall of Saigon, South Vietnamese loyalists were frantic to leave. Hundreds were climbing onto any helicopter that could fly. When the US embassy was evacuated, helicopters flew personnel to naval ships waiting offshore. The helicopters were then pushed overboard to make room for those lucky enough to catch a flight. The scenes from the nightly news were horrific. America had just lost the war. Okay, technically not a war, but an armed conflict, where 58,000 Soldiers, Marines, Sailors, Airmen, and Coast Guardsmen died. That was the larger context at the time I joined the military.

In December 1973, I proudly told my parents I was enlisting in the Air Force. I was seventeen, and while I'd have to wait until my eighteenth birthday to serve, I could sign up. I remember my father offering, "The war is over, and it'll be a long time before America gets into another one like that. It's probably the best time to go in."

My mother just cried.

My goals were simple. First, I wanted to get married and live with Lillian on our own. Second, I wanted to piece together the first few years of a college degree. A degree in what? Who knew. I never even thought about what I wanted to be when I grew up. I still don't know. Getting married and being able to go to college were the only two goals I had. Everything else was too far off or too complicated to consider.

First things first, I needed money. The recruiter said if I enlisted for six years instead of the usual four, I'd get an additional twenty-nine dollars per month, every month. I signed the paperwork. Not being eighteen, my parents were required to sign as well. Three days after Christmas and halfway through my senior year, I took the oath of

enlistment. Thankfully, I was allowed to delay basic training until after high school graduation. In August, I flew to Lackland Air Force Base (AFB) in San Antonio, Texas, to begin Air Force Basic Military Training.

I had signed up to be trained as a cryptological systems repairman. This technical school lasted eight months and was one of the hardest to qualify for. It also had the highest dropout rate. I didn't know what cryptological systems were or why they needed to be repaired. I had no idea what any of it meant, but it all sounded very important.

That short summer after graduation solidified our plans—or so I thought. I left for Texas, and Lillian remained at home, waiting.

She's done a lot of waiting over the years. This was just the introduction. Having gone to high school and spent it mostly awake, she had excellent grades and could've gone to any college she wanted. Instead, she elected to stay close to home, continue making money, and wait.

She eventually enrolled at California State University, Northridge. She was going to major in waiting. To earn money, she waitressed for family friends at their International House of Pancakes (IHOP) restaurant in Topanga, a city on the wealthier side of the San Fernando Valley.

She saved her money, mostly because she didn't have to take me out and buy me dinner anymore. She bought her first car with cash she saved from tips. The 1972 Chevy Vega was bright gold and all hers—title and everything.

In early August, I remember getting on the bus in downtown Los Angeles. My father handed me a crisp new five-dollar bill. "I'd give you more, but you won't need it."

Truer words have never been spoken. I viewed it as a bit cruel at the time, but what did I know? It turned out, other than the soda I bought before boarding the bus, I still had change from that five dollars when I graduated from basic training nine weeks later.

When I showed up at basic, the one-hundred-plus degree heat in San Antonio was unbelievable. I knew hot weather and loved it. Growing up in the Southern California desert, heat was second nature, but the humidity was something new and disagreeable. When I got off the bus, the wall of heat and moisture hit me like a tidal wave. Standing in the dark after we arrived on base at zero-dark-thirty, I swear my eyelids were sweating.

The buses and flights were designed to deliver new recruits between three and four in the morning, apparently calculated to ensure everyone was wide awake and at their most alert. Why else would we arrive so long before sunrise? For those few who were a bit groggy from their travels, drill instructors (DIs) repeated everything three times. For anyone hard of hearing, they talked really, really loud. How considerate they all were.

The bus I took from the San Antonio airport had a mix of Los Angeles hippies, African American farm kids from North Carolina, and me—your hero.

It turned out I liked basic training. That might sound a bit odd. The physical conditioning was no problem, as I was in good shape from my high school track days. For some reason, instructors didn't want us to sleep too much or for too long, and making our beds was a big deal. I found the DIs downright funny. Hard and demanding, they used a language I'd never heard. Even the words I knew were carefully pieced together to form insults and criticisms designed to make us better.

Once, a DI had us stand and place our heads between our knees as low as we could. He then yelled, "Stand up!" Then he said, "Pop! Congratulations, you've just pulled your f—ing head out of your ass."

See? The sergeants took time out of their busy days to offer us words of encouragement. They did care so about us.

I've done my share of stupid stuff in my life, but none so obvious and avoidable as volunteering. Never volunteer. Everyone knows that.

After an entire morning of running in place with full battle gear, our sweat soaked our socks. The afternoon turned into a rare luxury—we got to cool off in an air-conditioned classroom.

You know what it feels like to go into an air-conditioned room after you’ve been in the sun and heat. The classroom felt like a meat locker. We were freezing, wet, and tired.

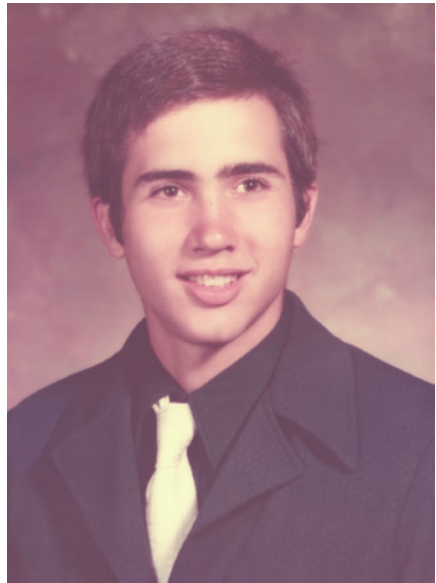
The DI then asked a simple question: “Which one of you jabronis knows anything about electronics?”

The dumbass side of me raised my hand. Maybe I was a tad confused. That’s my excuse.

“Good. You sit next to the light switch. We’re going to watch a film.”

Instead of being hailed for volunteering, I was mocked for being so gullible. This gave the rest of the recruits a good laugh at my expense.

I volunteered only one more time before I got out of basic, and that made all the difference.



**Gary Zelinski, St Genevieve High  
School graduation, 1974**

## War Story 12 (1974)

**A**uthor's note: The phrase *war story* applies to any tale told by one military person to another. All of us veterans have war stories. It seems that the older we are and the further removed from actual events we get, the truer the stories become, if they even occurred at all. Throughout this memoir, I offer several war stories. The number I attribute to these stories—for example, War Story 12—is as random as my memories. Any attempt to assign undue meaning or chronology would seriously call into question the facts that I've mostly made up.

To qualify for the US Air Force Small Arms Expert Marksmanship Ribbon, an Airman recruit needed to put ninety-five out of one hundred rounds in the target. This ribbon was a big deal. You got to wear it on your uniform—forever. All of us really wanted it. I needed to have it.

On day one of small-arms training, we learned how to assemble and disassemble an M16. We also spent a lot of time on safety. On day two, we got to fire the rifle. That was the highlight of basic training for new recruits. That was the first time I'd ever fired a gun.

The only other time I fired a weapon was years later in officer training school. There, we got to fire a 9 mm sidearm. The target was much closer—though it didn't help.



**US Air Force Small Arms Expert Marksmanship Ribbon**

On that fateful day of small-arms training, self-respecting recruits hoped to excel. For the sake of our honor, we needed to excel and win a cool ribbon for our uniform. With no ribbons and no stripes, you might as well drive a bus.

Because my last name starts with a Z, I was the last in a line of over a hundred recruits, all anxious to prove their mettle. A hundred nervous Airmen lying in the prone position. We waited in the San Antonio heat and humidity, and we sweated like fish. The concrete at the firing range was cool, which helped a bit but not nearly enough.

Then, in marched the female recruits.

Did I say female? We were eighteen years old, and it had been weeks since any of us had seen a female. Yes, women could join the military even back in my day. Everything was separate though. They had their side of Lackland AFB, and we had ours. All training and, of course, the barracks and chow halls were separate, so we never saw them. The only time we came together was on the single small-arms firing range. One firing range was enough for the Air Force. After all, we weren't the Army.

As I recall, the first gal in line was gorgeous and so was the gal next to her. Not as gorgeous as Lillian but from the same gender. As the female recruits took their places, I glanced over their way. No, I didn't stare. I removed my cap, just to be polite. I was cool—hot and sweaty—but cool.

I had only a little time to exchange a few awkward words with the closest female recruits next to me. They both appeared nervous and looked like they didn't want to be there. The closest one was the taller of the two; she had brown hair and a nervous grin. Her companion was blonde and might not have been even five feet tall. She didn't look nervous. She was downright scared.

"So are you shooting for a marksmanship ribbon?" I asked.

"Hell no," they said in unison.

"We couldn't hit the side of a barn even if we were standing right in front of it," the blonde said.

Then I had a brilliant idea. The idea was so great, I was assured of winning that ribbon. I told those recruits that a marksmanship ribbon was important to me.

"Would you mind shooting at my target?" I asked. "Not all your rounds . . . just a few. To help me out."

They exchanged a glance.

"Sure, no problem," the tall one said.

Instead of a hundred shots to make the needed ninety-five, I potentially had three hundred.

Well, in theory.

At the command "commence fire," we fired our hundred bullets in short bursts. A volley of lead echoed up and down the range. As the smoke clouds grew heavier, my eyes burned.

After several shots, I looked at the first female recruit. She had her eyes closed. The second recruit was even worse. She was crying and shaking, her tears pooling on the concrete.

I feared my plan wouldn't work.

At the command "cease fire," we retrieved our targets. First, each recruit counted the bullet holes in their own target. If you claimed ninety-five holes or more, a drill instructor needed to certify your score and sign your target. On his signature, you could claim your ribbon.

I couldn't believe it. It must have been a fluke. My target had over ninety-five bullet holes. I stopped counting at ninety-five, but the drill instructor continued to count. Finally, he stopped.

He stopped counting at 150.

The drill instructor signed my target. After the drill instructor left, I thanked the two female recruits. I never saw them again. Three years after graduating from basic training, I was awarded an Air Force Good Conduct Medal

(AFGCM). That was the equivalent of an employee of the quarter award. Only thing was, it took three years to get one. To be awarded the medal, you needed to have excellent efficiency reports. But more important than that, you must not have any convictions by court martial. Not having recently stabbed anyone, I was awarded one. The coolest thing about that medal was officers don't get them. For lieutenants, captains, and a few majors, good conduct is a given. Later, as an officer, I attended many formal ceremonies wearing my dress blues.

Fellow officers often asked, "What's that medal for?" Few had ever seen a medal for good conduct.

"I got this in France," I said.

In our final week of basic training, we could earn a real luxury. If we had no demerits and our gear passed inspection, we could request a pass to go to the base exchange (BX).

To travel, we needed to sign out from the barracks and travel in groups of two or more. Did I say travel? I meant march. We had to march. Hence the need to have at least two recruits—one to call cadence and the other to march out of step. That would be me.



**Air Force Good  
Conduct Medal  
(AFGCM)**

Most of the recruits made a beeline for the cigarette aisle. I didn't know what to get. I still had some change from the five dollars my father gave me, so I bought a Coca-Cola.

We also bought our very own National Defense Service Medal. This medal was authorized by Congress during periods of war or armed conflict. None of us were sure or understood why we got to wear the medal. Vietnam was over. We called it the BX medal. Nobody gave it to us. We had to go to the BX and buy it.

As we marched back, I noticed two recruits marching and calling cadence. For some reason, the reality of enlisting in the military became clear. I looked at those soon-to-be Airmen basics. They had no stripes on their sleeves yet, but I'm sure they were as proud as I was of our newly purchased National Defense Service Medal.

Then it hit me. Those Airmen basics were the price of freedom—ready to die if needed. According to our nation, they were expendable.

So was I.



**The National Defense  
Service Medal**