

Returning to Pittsburgh (1973–1975)

Our two-bedroom apartment at 306 Maxwell Street in Crafton, Pennsylvania, was only ten miles from the airport and Air National Guard base. Mary and I unpacked the U-Haul and set up what little we had in our new apartment: baby items, a crib, two folding chairs, a TV, and household and kitchen essentials. My brother lent us portable cots until our furniture arrived.

The new apartment was small compared to our home in Topeka, and the galley kitchen was in a narrow hallway connecting the living room to the two bedrooms. The entrance to the bathroom was from the larger bedroom. The walls were paper thin, and we heard most of what was going on in the apartment below.



306 Maxwell Street, second-floor apartment
Dennis Jr., fifteen months old

The furniture was scheduled to arrive within the week. It was delivered damaged six weeks later, and I filed a damage claim with the moving company. We eventually recovered all of the initial costs of the move. Not a good start to our new ad-venture. Regardless, we looked forward to getting settled and reacquainted with family and friends after being away for four years. We were new to this part of town, both of us were raised in the city.

We had to decide early on whether Mary would go back to work or stay home with Dennis Jr. Our rent was now \$185 a month, \$35 higher than our mortgage payment in Topeka. The cost of daycare was considerably higher in Pittsburgh, and without a second income, things would be tight.

Mary initially decided to stay home with the baby until things settled down. A major part of her salary would have gone for childcare, plus most jobs required a commute and possibly a second car, which we couldn't afford. We were accustomed to doing without and knew we had to be frugal for the time being.

Mother lived in a tiny fourth-floor attic apartment on Winebiddle Street in Pittsburgh, about thirty minutes away. She sold household products by phone and earned just enough to make ends meet. The climb to her apartment was a challenge. It was one stark room, maybe two hundred square feet tops, incorporating a tiny galley kitchen in one alcove and a bathroom. Her furniture consisted of a small kitchen table with two chairs, one lounge chair, a chest of drawers, and a couch that she slept on. There wasn't a TV or a radio in her apartment. It was a bleak setting to say the least.

She had been living there for about a year. Mary and I immediately found a TV and radio for her apartment, and we had her over often. She got along well with Mary and her new grandson.

Upon reporting to work, I discovered that my new supervisor left my SF-171 employment application on his desk when I first applied. My coworkers passed it around the shop, and this created some tension, especially with one of the older senior technicians. Federal applications are extensive and quite different from private-sector resumes. Most applications were handwritten back then; mine was neatly typed with attachments. You had to list all of your training and work experience in detail to show how you met the qualifications for the position.

My application package listed my active-duty tour, work with the Kansas Air National Guard, first-class FCC license, awards, and schooling—a lot for a twenty-four-year-old.

After reporting, I sensed that something wasn't quite right, especially with one technician. I asked one of the crew what the problem was. He said that after reading my application, some of the crew thought their services wouldn't be required. I laughed.

The 171st ANG unit in Pittsburgh flew KC-97 refueling tankers and still had several decommissioned Super Constellations (the Super Connie) on the flight line. Their avionics systems were similar to what I worked on in Topeka, and it didn't take long to find my bearings. Overall, the guys were receptive to having another technician to share the workload.



KC-97 refueling tanker—four props and two jet engines

During my first week, Tom, one of the system specialists, showed me around the base and introduced me to others throughout the organization. Several technicians lived a few blocks away from our apartment, and I joined their carpool so Mary would have the car several days a week.

That week I met Captain Harry Damp for the first time. He asked me to stop by his office, and we talked for an hour or more about possible family connections. It turned out that our fathers were first cousins. Besides Aunt Alice and Uncle Chuck who was also my father's cousin, Harry was the first Damp family member I met.



Captain Harry Damp, 1974

This base was considerably larger than Forbes AFB, and there were two ANG squadrons—the 112th Fighter Group and the 171st Air Refueling Wing, plus the 911th Air Force Reserve unit. The Air National Guard refueling squadrons across the country rotated to Europe to refuel aircraft flying in the corridor between East and West Germany. The mission was called “Creek Party,” and on deployments, we were stationed TDY at

Rhein-Main Air Force Base, just outside of Frankfurt, Germany.

I've always been a workaholic and often worked through breaks. A base siren announced the fifteen-minute morning and afternoon breaks, and most stopped whatever they were doing for a smoke or to sit around and talk.

Several of the technicians thought I was grandstanding, and on several occasions, they shut down the MD-3 power cart to disable my workbench. The technicians in Topeka didn't have a problem with working through breaks. When working on a complex problem, many of the technicians continued working and took breaks later in the day or extended their lunch break. It took me several months to adapt to this mindset and new work environment.

Dennis Junior was growing up fast. We celebrated his second birthday in Pittsburgh nine months after returning home. Mary and I were adjusting to our new surroundings and getting reacquainted with our relatives. Mother wasn't doing well physically or emotionally at the time. Now that we were home, Mary and I had her over often, including all holidays, and I visited as often as I could. We frequently talked by phone.

Wendy, Mary's sister, stayed with her aunt Myrtle in East Pittsburgh. She stopped for dinner with us several times each week and often stayed overnight, sleeping on our couch. Her commute to work was shorter, and our two-bedroom apartment filled up fast. When Mom visited, she often stayed overnight.



Wendy holding DJ, Christmas 1974

I served one weekend a month and two weeks a year on active military duty with the Air National Guard. My military commitment was essentially my second job.

Our new neighbors, John and Jean, became good friends. John was a meat inspector for the Department of Agriculture, and we had a lot in common, as we both worked for Uncle Sam. John was a former Army cook and was an exceptional chef; we were invited for dinner often. John loved kids and was great with Dennis Junior. Mary took Jean to her doctor's appointments, and she often visited.

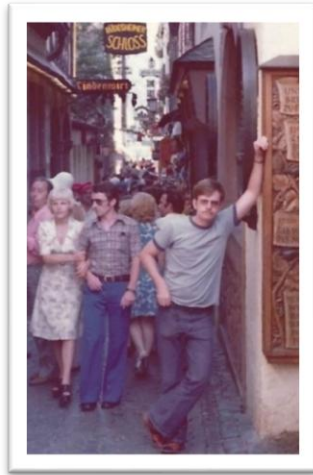


John and Jean at DJ's third birthday party

Ten months after transferring to Pittsburgh, I was promoted to staff sergeant E-5 on May 1, 1974, and then to tech sergeant E-6 on November 1, 1975.

On the way home from work one day, I discovered a new home plan in Robinson Township, which was closer to work. They had a small four-bedroom new home available for \$36,000. It didn't have much of a yard, but it would have worked for us. Unfortunately, homes in Pittsburgh were considerably more expensive than in Topeka. We didn't have enough for the down payment, and the mortgage was too high for my salary. Had we been able to purchase the home, Mother could have moved in with us.

I deployed on TDY three times during my time with the PA ANG—twice to Frankfort, Germany, and once to San Francisco. In the early 1970s, Germany was beautiful, and I enjoyed visiting their historical sites and museums and sampling German beer and apple wine when off duty. The locals were friendly.



Germany weekend travels, 1974

My first deployment to Rhein-Main AFB was in October 1974, a little over a year after arriving back in Pittsburgh. The trip in our aging KC-97 propeller aircraft took us eighteen hours, with one refueling stop at Goose Bay, Canada. We had two flight crews on board, and when we flew at night, the engine cowlings glowed hot bright red.

While in flight, the search weather radar system was used either to lock on aircraft to be refueled or on weather formations that needed to be avoided. The pilots required more defined weather targets when traveling across the Atlantic, and I volunteered to adjust the system in flight. This involved going below the cockpit through an access hatch, taking the cover off the top of the radar system, and adjusting the klystron tube for the best weather targets on the pilots' displays.

The noise level was dangerously high in the equipment bays due to the inverters and high-speed cooling fans needed for each system. I had to wear headsets to talk with the pilots

during the alignment procedure and couldn't wear sound-suppression gear. The noise was unbearable. My hearing loss in later years could be attributed to working around high-speed equipment blowers and aircraft engine noise.

We spent eighteen days overseas, recovering our fleet of KC-97 tankers after refueling missions. We debriefed the flight crews when they returned and repaired any system malfunctions so they could resume flights the next day. Between flights, if we didn't have any systems down, we were on standby and would play ping-pong in the hangar or visit the BX and other on-base facilities. In the evenings, we went to the NCO club or visited restaurants and bars in the local area. We traveled to Frankfurt twice.

We explored the area around the airport when off duty, and a group of us took a one-day Rhine River cruise to Marksburg Castle. I spent most of my travel funds on gifts—a china service for eight at the BX and an 18-karat white gold opal ring for Mary. Our fifth anniversary was fast approaching.



Docking at Marksburg Castle, 1974

I discovered a Federal Aviation Administration avionics re-pair shop on base and visited to explore positions that may be available stateside. They serviced airborne avionics systems for the FAA's flight check aircraft stationed at overseas military installations. Unfortunately, their stateside aircraft servicing facilities were located in Oklahoma City and on the East Coast, far from Pittsburgh. They suggested I contact FAA offices back home that serviced ground-based navigational aids and communications facilities located at airports nationwide.

In between deployments, we recovered aircraft after local sorties and trained part-time ANG members on system operations. Plus, we attended active military drills and summer camps. A year after I arrived back in Pittsburgh, the military announced a major base reorganization and sent all staff a reduction in force (RIF) notice. RIFs are essentially layoffs. When I first reported, I was assigned to the Strategic Air Command (SAC). After they reorganized, they transferred our group to the Tactical Air Command (TAC). The RIF notice motivated me to research other government and private-sector employment opportunities in the area.

In April 1975, Mother called me, incoherent and crying. I drove to her apartment and found her disheveled and upset. She was on the verge of a nervous breakdown; I drove her to a local hospital where she signed the admittance papers. It was a difficult day for both of us.

Mary and I visited Mother often during her stay. She spent a month in the hospital, and I brought her home to our apartment to recuperate for several weeks. Thankfully, Aunt Pauline invited Mother to spend a week at their home before returning to her apartment in late May. They had a spare bedroom, and this gave Mother another week to rest. She had to sleep on the couch at our apartment.

My brother and I started looking for a senior-living facility for Mom. They refused her application because she was only sixty, as you had to be sixty-two unless you were disabled.

Mother applied for assistance and received seventy-five dollars a month. Her rent was forty-five dollars a month. She earned a little extra income by selling long-life lightbulbs by phone, but it was just enough to make ends meet. Mary and I helped out and continued looking for housing; however, there were no affordable options available.

Around this time, I began restoring a one-hundred-year-old black walnut dining room set in the basement of the complex. It was literally in pieces when I brought it home. I stripped, stained, and painted the set and reupholstered the chair seats, adding gold paint for the trim. In the picture below, Dennis Jr. is sitting at the table. I paid my cousin eighty dollars for the set, and it took me six months to complete.



Dennis Junior's third birthday, March 5, 1975

We celebrated Dennis Junior's third birthday at our apartment. He was growing up fast and talking up a storm. Our

mild-mannered son was a fast learner and already potty-trained. He loved playing with his Matchbox cars and toys in the evening before bed while we watched TV. We could take him anywhere and enjoyed watching him experience new things.

Throughout life, I've always taken on projects out of necessity at first if we didn't have funds to pay for needed services. Later in life, it became a habit that I continue to this day. Why pay someone to remodel the basement when I could do the job for less? Or why not restore my old pickup to get a few more years out of it? I've moderated that stance somewhat over the past two decades.

The next three months flew by. I went on a two-week deployment to San Francisco and was scheduled for a second Creek Party deployment in early August. I also completed additional on-the-job training (OJT) for new avionics systems.



Working on a TACAN system, November 1975
Shortly after my promotion to TSGT

I left for my second Creek Party deployment in late July and stopped to see Mother before departing. She seemed like her old self. That December, she would be sixty-one, and next year she could get on the waiting list for senior housing.

During my first week in Germany, four of us technicians planned to tour Switzerland on the weekend and packed up an old Mercedes sedan rental for the trip. The commander summoned me to his office an hour before we were scheduled to leave. He held a Red Cross notification. Mother passed away of natural causes the night before on August 5, 1975. The commander arranged for a secure line for me to call home, and Mary told me about her last few days. I headed to the airport for the first flight home.

Mother called Mary Friday afternoon and asked her to come over, as she wasn't feeling well. Mary, Dennis Jr., and Wendy made her dinner, tidied up, and tried to get her to go to the hospital. She refused and said she felt better. They stayed for several hours. She died in her sleep that night.

Mom and I were close, and we talked and visited frequently since I returned to Pittsburgh. She sacrificed everything for her family, and it seemed like she never got a break. She deserved so much more.

Mother's meager belongings were distributed at her apartment a week after the funeral: clothes to Flo for her daughters, household goods to my sisters, and a few things for Harold. I wanted items to remind me of her every day: her photo albums, certain kitchen utensils, and Grandmother's English teapot. There was little else except for eight dollars in her checking account. She had a thousand-dollar life insurance policy that paid for a good portion of the funeral expenses. Connie and I paid the remainder and ordered a beautiful pink granite head-stone for her grave. I added the last stanza of the poem she wrote for her mother when she passed:

“Knowing you had been a pleasure.
Those years we shared, we will treasure.
Forget you no we never will,
Your loving memory lingers still.”

Mother’s passing was unexpected and had a profound impact on me for many years. Without thinking, I often picked up the phone to tell her about something that happened that day or to ask her a question only she could answer. We always talked about anything and everything. I lost my mother and my best friend.

I recall visiting Mother one overcast morning not long after returning to Pittsburgh; she insisted on making bacon, eggs, and toast for me. Before I left, she lovingly scolded me for not wearing a raincoat.

Shortly after she died, I visited the air traffic control tower at the Pittsburgh airport to inquire about electronic technician positions.

The only way to find federal job vacancies at the time was to visit the federal building downtown and review the job announcements posted on the personnel office’s bulletin board. In September, I found an announcement for a GS-856-7/11 electronics technician position with the FAA at Phillipsburg, Pennsylvania, 145 miles northeast of Pittsburgh.

The position offered a small pay increase initially. However, promotions were automatic to the GS-11 grade as long as the applicant passed their training program and obtained the required equipment certifications. The GS-11 pay was considerably higher than I could ever hope to make with the Air National Guard. It would take me two years to reach the GS-11 grade or longer, depending on school availability. There

was a significant risk, if I failed the schools I would be terminated!

That same week, I visited the USAir hangar at the airport and talked with their personnel office. They had openings, and I picked up an application and met the avionics shop supervisor. He encouraged me to apply. I was at a fork in the road. At the Pittsburgh airport, the road to the left led to the FAA's air-traffic control tower, while a right took you to USAir's maintenance hangar.

We had much to consider. Mary was disappointed that we might have to leave Pittsburgh again just two and a half years after returning. Plus, we didn't know how this would logistically work. I would have to attend lengthy training in Oklahoma at the FAA Academy. This was a huge decision: either stay with the ANG and take my chances, or apply with the airlines or the FAA.

If I worked for USAir, we wouldn't have to move, their equipment was similar, and I'd been doing the same type of work for the past five years. The job with the FAA required a move and a considerable amount of training for new ground-based systems, but it had significant promotion potential and much higher pay after two years.

We agreed that the FAA was the best path for us, and I applied for the position in mid-September 1975. I already had five years of combined military and federal service, and if I stayed with the federal government, I could retire at age fifty-five with thirty-five years of service.

The FAA called and scheduled an interview with me at Clearfield, Pennsylvania. The interview lasted over two hours, and they dissected my work experience and training. The district manager quizzed me on complex radar system theory. He, too, had a first-class FCC license and was a pilot. The interviewers warned me that 30 percent of those hired didn't make

it through the training program and were let go. They qualified their remarks by saying that with my background I should do well if selected.

Shortly after the interview, I was offered the job and gave the ANG two weeks' notice. Mary had to stay in Crafton with Dennis Junior until I found an apartment. Plus, we didn't want to relocate until I passed the initial training. We only had one car, so Mary would be without a vehicle during the week until I purchased another. There were lots of loose ends to deal with. Something we were quite used to.

I reported to the flight service station at the Phillipsburg airport on December 7, 1975. Fortunately, my military promotion to tech sergeant (TSgt) was submitted six weeks earlier; I was officially promoted on November 1, a week before leaving for my new job. I stayed with the ANG part-time until 1980, serving one weekend a month and two weeks for summer camp each year. I am proud that I had the opportunity to serve and wear the Air Force uniform for over ten years.