

**MG Nathaniel James AUS
Narrator**

**Wayne Clark
Eric Stott
New York State Military Museum
Interviewers**

**September 4, 2007
At the Henry Johnson Charter School
Albany, New York.**

WC: Today is September 4, 2007. We are at the Henry Johnson Charter School in Albany, New York. We are doing an interview with General James. The interviewers are Eric Stott and Wayne Clark. For the record, please state your name and date of birth.

NJ: My name is Nathaniel James; I was born July 28, 1935.

WC: Where were you raised and where did you go to school?

NJ: I was raised in NYC, the Bronx. I attended a number of Public Schools in New York and graduated from the Bronx Vocational Academy. From there I went into the service.

WC: Were you drafted or did you enlist?

NJ: I was a volunteer draftee. What was happening was this; I was an African American living in a mostly all-white neighborhood with limited job opportunities. As a kid out of high school trying to get a job, well, it was kind of hard. What happened is that they used the excuse of not hiring you by asking: "Have your served yet?" If you were at draft age and had yet to be drafted, they'd say, "well soon they're gonna draft you and I'll lose you as an employee." Well, I said, let me get it out of the way and I volunteered drafted.

WC: And you went into the Army?

NJ: I went into the Army at Fort Dix, New Jersey.

WC: What date was this approximately?

NJ: October 18th, 1953.

WC: You went to Fort Dix for basic training?

NJ: Yes. I went through my basic training cycle shortly after the army desegregated. I was a part of one of the first desegregated companies at Fort Dix. I was assigned to the 47th infantry regiment. To my right was a company of all white soldiers and to my left was a company of all black soldiers. My company was in the middle and it was integrated.

WC: What were the Drill Sergeants like?

NJ: The First Sergeant we had in Basic Training was a man who had combat experience in Korea. Usually, when talking to the privates, he didn't say too much other than to the ones standing in front of the formation, where he would often bark at them. You had very little to do with him because you had a Field First Sergeant. The Field First Sergeant was the guy who made the training work. He was a fairly new guy and he knew his job. He was also a Korean War veteran. The other two Sergeants were the same way. The Sergeants in general were very knowledgeable about what they were doing and they treated us pretty well.

WC: Your Company was made up of men from all over the United States?

NJ: Right, they were from all over the United States. The bulk of them were from the eastern part of the United States. We had a few from the Mid-West and West, but most were from the East Coast.

WC: Was this your first time away from home?

NJ: No, I would have to say, when I first joined up, before counter draft, I joined the New York National Guard. I joined the New York 369th Regiment and ironically, in my class at Fort Dix, there was one with me who had been in the 369th with me. In high school, while on a recruiting drive, he asked me old I was, I told him I was 17. He said we might be able to get you in, why don't you just come down and talk to the First Sergeant. I went down and spoke to the First Sergeant and at that time, I liked the Army. All I had to do was get my mother to sign the papers. I went back home to my mother, and she said "Son, do you want to do this?" I said "yes ma'am." She said ok, signed the papers and I got into the 369th. But after a while with the job situation like I said before, I decided to volunteer draft.

WC: So that must have helped you a lot in basic training.

NJ: It didn't help me at all. In fact, it caused me a little trouble. I clearly knew they things they were teaching me and when I said I knew this, they'd tell me to "get the hell out of here, you're going through the training anyhow." With it however, I also thought I'd get a leadership position in basic, but that never happened. However, I succeeded in being a guide arm bearer because I had training in that and no one else did. This was a little more work than a regular soldier had to do. I had to get ready and be out in front of the formation every time a formation was called.

WC: Was basic training eight weeks at the time?

NJ: 8 weeks basic, 8 weeks advanced.

WC: So, your advanced training, was that in Infantry training?

NJ: Yes. I took 8 weeks basic with the 47th and I took advanced infantry training with the 364th infantry regiment, which was also part of the 9th division.

WC: Once you completed your training, where did you go from there?

NJ: After I completed my training, which was all winter, they sent me to Fort Devens. In fact, they split the whole company up. They sent everyone in different directions because the Korean War started its peace talks and they weren't asking for any more soldiers to come over. They send me to Fort Devens, Massachusetts to work as a quartermaster in a graves registration unit. It's funny, on the first day that you get there; you go past the barracks of each unit. The artillery barracks have cannon in front, the infantry has rifles, the tank units have a tank, and this unit had a tombstone in front. So, as someone who grew up fearing cemeteries, I thought it was a little morbid.

Then I found out most of the guys there were well educated and wanted to be there. Some of them were embalmers and had the background of being undertakers for their families. So being in that company was an experience for them. They liked getting the training and the training was very good. So, I learned a lot about a lot of people.

WC: What was your job with the unit?

NJ: My job was what we call a graves registration specialist. What you would do, other than collect the bodies and put them in cemeteries, is prepare them for shipment. When we had to go out on a mission search, we had to go out and search for bodies and for soldiers who were hastily buried. We had to dig them up, and bring them back. Basically that's what it was all about. Since we were at Fort Devens and saw no combat, there wasn't a whole lot for us to go and do. So they invented things for us to do, like going out building bunkers, setting up tents. It was a lot of dirty work.

While at Fort Devens, I was also there for what served to be the first atomic bomb test they had in the army. It was Operation Raindrop and it was held at Fort Devens. I had the opportunity to one of the service troops digging bunkers, putting up tents and what not for it. After that, we did kitchen duty in the mess hall. I had never seen so many officers and Generals in my life. I must have seen 10 Generals. The lowest guy out there was a Major and they were all doing this exercise together.

What they did was stimulate an atomic explosion and they had to do a downwind forecast and I guess it was all new stuff then. Later on, I learned the fundamentals of what they were doing.

WC: How long were you at Fort Devens?

NJ: I was stationed at Fort Devens for two years, although I went TDY a couple of times. I went TDY to Cape Cod to put up tents, we also to the Pine lawn cemetery in Long Island, New York.

Here we put up tents and set up details to help the cemetery in its upkeep and burying the dead. While we were there, they were burying someone every six minutes. While there, they were mostly burying men coming back from Korea.

From there, the company itself was assigned detail in Cyprus Hill, Brooklyn and assigned to the cemetery. The Cemetery fallen into repute and tombstones were facing the wrong way. Our job was to straighten them all of them out and face each of them towards the flag pole. We did that for about two months.

It was good duty, and I liked it because it was in New York and I was able to go home a couple of nights after our duty was over. Naturally, if you had been a good soldier, and if your Sergeant liked you, you could go off and see your family. If not, you had to return to camp each night.

WC: When your two years were up, did you get out of the military?

NJ: When the two years were up, it was like everyone else in the service was like, "I never want to see another mess hall ever again, when I'm done, I'm out for good, when they put locks on garbage cans, I'll be back," all that kind of stuff. When I got out, I went to work for my Uncle. While working for him, I realized I had to do more than what I was doing, so I decided to join the National Guard again. I went back to the 369th, but now had two more year's experience. When I got out, I was a Specialist 3, which is not called Specialist 4. So, when I got back, I had all this experience and I was heads and soldiers over all the rest of them. So they made me the rank of Sergeant. My job was as a Machine Gun Sergeant in a Field Artillery unit. I had the job of putting a perimeter defense and putting up lanes of fire. It was a one man job, but I had to handle all the machine guns.

WC: What kind of machine guns where they?

NJ: .50 calibers. I had to load all of the .50 calibers on and off the trucks, I had to clean them, load them, and when the orders came, I had to set them up in the field. I also had to out and check to make sure they were in the right and pick them up where when moved. It was a lot of work that I had to do, but I liked to do it. It was also something I could do very well. Moreover, most of the soldiers looked up to me for my experience and I could show them things like burying mines, camouflaging mines and so forth.

So after being there for a while, they asked me if I wanted to be the Survey Master Sergeant. So, I thought about it, and after a while, I said to myself, yes I can do it. They said to me I'd have to go to school for it, and since I was working for the telephone company at the time, I could get off from work for it. Shortly after I said yes, my commander said to me, if you're going to go for survey training, why don't you go OCS? I said to myself, oh that's right, a First Lieutenant, makes more than a Master Sergeant. So, I told him I'll go OCS. So, I went to Fort Sill, Robertson Barracks, and Oklahoma.

As it turns out, I was one of only two African Americans in the class, and the guy didn't make it because of some kind of infraction. So, I ended up being the only African American in the class. When we started, we had 47 of us, when we finished, we had 17. I was still one of them.

WC: How were you treated?

NJ: I was treated like the other soldiers. There were a couple of times I was treated with prejudice I thought, and some unnecessary harassment. We had a candidate, an upper class mate who seemed to not like blacks. So he would single me out and made sure I had more demerits than everyone else and I complained about it to the TAC officer. The TAC officer was from Georgia and said to me, “well, maybe he’s just trying to make you a better soldier.” I had been in the army for two years; I already knew how to be a soldier. They warned the upper class soldier that if he continued to pick on me, he would lose his position as Second Lieutenant. He let off me after that. One occasion however, he came up to me and said “you know I was only trying to help you.” As it happened, I graduated and came back to my unit, the 369th.

WC: As it happened, you were commissioned an infantry officer?

NJ: No, it was as an Artillery Officer, Field Artillery. After I got my field artillery commission, which wasn’t immediate, I had to wait until I graduated. I graduated in March and received my commission in June, because there was some paperwork when you came into that. Finally, after a number of interviews, I was commissioned a Second Lieutenant.

But for me it was an advantage, because I already had enlisted experience. There wasn’t much the enlisted people could get away with in not being able to do their duties. I knew all the little tricks that went into it, I knew what guys would try and get away with. As it turned out, I understood the enlisted men better than most of the officers because I had served as an enlisted person. So the men understood I was their Lieutenant and I wouldn’t ask them to do anything I wouldn’t do.

WC: So at this point you were a platoon leader?

NJ: I was a platoon leader and at that time we were supposed to have five officers in a battalion. But later on it went down to three, then two, but the (inaudible) was still the same. As it turned out, we had a shortage of officers and I ended up being a Second Lieutenant Batter Commander, Service Batter. For many, many years, I was the only officer in that Company/Batter. It wasn’t until a number of years later when we turned transportation that we got more officers. By then, I was ready to go to staff duty.

WC: What rank were you by this point?

NJ: By this point, I was a Captain. So, I was a Captain with a lot of experience. Because if you look at the officer promotion space, you see a Second Lieutenant has to serve three years, I did three years. First Lieutenant has to serve five years, but can be promoted after two. I served eight years and then I got to be Captain. With Captain, you get to do two years before you get promoted and seven was the max. I served the max in all of them.

WC: So you came up the hard way.

NJ: Right, then I had made Major. After making Major, I served five years. Here, I said this is it, if I don't get promoted from here I'm going into the reserves because I am getting nowhere here in the Guard. At that time, I was ready for Lt. Colonel.

WC: You were a Battalion Commander at this point?

NJ: No, not until I became a Lt. Colonel. What happened to me was that they transferred me from the 369th to the 42nd Infantry Division as the Maintenance Battalion Command. That's one of the largest unit's battalion wise.

WC: What year was that?

NJ: That was 1984.

WC: So at this point, you had almost 30 years of service.

NJ: Right, when I got there, General Wayne, Commander of the 42nd, said to me "Hey Jimmy, we need someone over here to run the 369th." I said to him, "I'd love to be the Commander of the 369th." At any rate, he said to me that if I could convince the Commander of that unit to take another Battalion, I could have the 369th.

So, I convinced the Commander to take another unit, he was a friend of mine. He said he'll take another unit and I became commander of the 369th. Being Commander of the 369th was easy because I served in it and I knew the battalion.

WC: So, you started as a Private and worked your way up to Commander?

NJ: That's right. I could lead the battalion with one hand tied behind my back because I knew the unit, the people. I knew the strengths and weaknesses, so it was easy. Getting out of the 42nd division was easy. The guy in charge of the 42nd was happy to see me go and was happy that I was able to switch places and lead the 369th. I also guess you could say that was the icing on the cake. This was also about the same time division command was leaving New York State.

By going away from New York State, I could lead the 369th any way I wanted. A lot of guys who came into the 369th thought it was a regular army unit. They were always surprised it was a National Guard unit. But this was the way I could use my unit. I had all my NCOs trained the way I wanted. I also had my junior officers trained so that they could do the job they were responsible for doing. I made a lot of good points and at that point, they decided that maybe I'm ready to be Colonel. So, once again I had to back to the Division.

Being an Artillery Officer, and a Transportation Officer, most people thought I wasn't qualified for Artillery. But what they didn't realize was that I already been an Artillery Officer and that I already had advanced Artillery training. So as it happened, they made me division Commander.

As it turns out, I was the first African American to ever serve in that post. I served in that role until 1987. From 1987, they decided that needed to be moved again; this time they moved me to DISCOM. I would say that's the first time in the 42nd division history that a Colonel who served as two Brigade Commanders in the division.

From DISCOM, they asked if I wanted to go with a troop command. So, I moved to troop command and became the Deputy Commander, troop command. That's when I became Brigadier General. This happened in 1988.

After serving as Deputy Commander for a while, they moved the troop command down to New York City. They made me Command and that was a two star slot. Later on, they would reorganize things with the division, opening up with things in the different states. The division commander was going to leave. They needed an Army Commander, so they asked me and him to decide, and since we were the only two star Generals in the state at the time, it came down to us. He said to me that he didn't want to stay in, he wanted to retire. So I ended up being the Army Commander of the New York National Guard. I stayed in that role until I retired in 1995.

WC: When you retired, did you get involved in the New York Guard?

NJ: No, I did not. After leaving, I decide maybe its time to give back. I was already a member of the Benevolent Veterans Association. I ran for President of the 369th Veterans Association. I won the election and I'm still there. I can't give the job away now. I was also running what they called the Historical Society. So I'm also the President of that. My time now is split between the two.

WC: Now, when you retired, how many years of service did you have in?

NJ: I had 43 years in. I guess you can say that you would really get out before that. But if I hadn't made General, I would have gotten out before that. As I stated before, they have the reserve officer promotion program. You either make your rank, or they put you out. With the rank of General however, you're out after a while or when you reach the age of 60. I reached the ago of 60. So, I can always say I was one of those guys who went from Private to General.

WC: Yes, that's quiet a record. I'm sure that over the years you made a lot of friends. Have you kept in touch with most of them?

NJ: Yes, I got friends all over the country. Yes, most of them are military people, but you do end up being friends. It's the common trend of comrades in arms. Although we never went to fight, we still had to contact on another for different operations, conferences and all that stuff. So, I still know a lot of people. It's funny, every time I travel across the country, every now and then; I tend to run into someone I know.

WC: Is there anything else you would like to add at all?

NJ: I would say that my career with my civilian job in the Phone company and in the National Guard parallel itself. The training I received in one helped me in the other. As a result, when I left the Guard, I was a regional security manager for NYNEX. So I had control of the New England States security.

It's always ironic to have a job like that because being in charge of security; everyone thinks your going to investigate them. My boss would come to me and say, "What day are we going to have a meeting? I have to pill everyone together, what days are you free?" Boy, this was

different than what I was use too, my boss asking me when I'm free so he could call a meeting. But that's the way it ended up in that type of job. It felt good when I left both jobs.

One question they always ask, do you miss it? I always say no, been there, done that. The experiences I had I still have in my mind. Some day maybe I'll write a book. I had a variety of experiences on many different levels that I'm proud of. So, I'd have to say I had a good career.

WC: Okay, well thank you so very much.

NJ: Thank you.