

**James Gray  
Veteran**

**Wayne Clarke  
New York State Military Museum  
Interviewer**

**Interviewed on  
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Saratoga County Veterans Transitional Home  
Ballston Spa, NY**

**Q:** For the record would you please state your full name and date and place of birth?

**JG:** James Gray. Date of birth 12/05/1950.

**Q:** Whereabouts were you born?

**JG:** Jamaica, NY

**Q:** Did you go to school and grow up in Jamaica?

**JG:** I went to school in Jamaica until I think it was the eighth grade. Then I moved to Poughkeepsie, New York and I went to school there until I went into the military.

**Q:** What year was that?

**JG:** Sixty-nine.

**Q:** I see here you entered the Air Force? You enlisted?

**JG:** Yes I was drafted but I enlisted.

**Q:** What made you pick the air force?

**JG:** The experience, you know I had a good education, I had the opportunity to higher education. I just thought the air force was a good place for me to do something with the skills I had.

**Q:** Where did you go for your basic training?

**JG:** Lackland Air Base in Texas.

**Q:** Was that basically your first time away from home?

**JG:** Yes I guess it was.

**Q:** What was it like at Lackland?

**JG:** It was rudimentary. It was basic training; everything was kind of hard but it was fair.

**Q:** Once you graduated from basic training where did you go from there?

**JG:** I went to Chanute Air Force Base in Illinois. For technical training and airfare mechanics, Jet Propulsion, aircraft science you know stuff like that.

**Q:** Did you work on a particular killer aircraft or was it general?

**JG:** It was more of a general basic knowledge of the systems. The airfare systems.

**Q:** Once you complete it, how long was that course for?

**JG:** I think it was about three to four months.

**Q:** Once you completed your schooling whereabouts were you sent next?

**JG:** I was sent to Plattsburgh air force base New York.

**Q:** When approximately was that?

**JG:** That was in sixty nine. I don't know the exact month.

**Q:** So it was probably during the summer or later on in the year?

**JG:** It was during the spring I think. I'm not sure I can't remember all of that.

**Q:** Well what was life like in Plattsburgh?

**JG:** It was good. You know it was good I learned a lot with my trade by MOS. I worked on b-52 bombers, kc-135 every fueling jet. I got a lot of flight line experience. So it was good it was a lot of hands on.

**Q:** Did you specialize in one field? Like hydraulics?

**JG:** Yes I specialized in hydraulics. But I had the basic knowledge of everything else. I got my top secret security clearance there, I worked on live aircraft with live ammo. You know and what they call sort of like a forbidden zone. High security.

**Q:** Restricted area?

**JG:** Yes restricted area yes.

**Q:** How long were you in Plattsburgh?

**JG:** I was in Plattsburgh about seven months I think something like that.

**Q:** What happened next?

**JG:** I went to do that, Plattsburgh was the eighth Air Force. There was strategic air command I did. From there I went to do some more training at Georgia Air Force Base, which was a tactical air force base. So I learned the F-4 Phantom Jets, I worked on them then. Worked on all weekends. C-130 Aircraft which would modify, you know I was winding back here because I was going overseas.

**Q:** Once you finished up with that were you shipped overseas?

**JG:** Yes

**Q:** Did you go home on leave at all?

**JG:** Yeah I went home on leave, well I went on a thirty day leave before I reported to Travis Air Force Base in California.

**Q:** How did you fly overseas? Was it on a Military Plane or civilian?

**JG:** It was civilian plane but it was all military personnel wanted. No civilians, all military. I guess it was something that the... I don't know rent it out or I don't know what it was but you know it was military, it was Deltas.

**Q:** Whereabouts did you land?

**JG:** I landed in Bangkok, Thailand.

**Q:** What was your impression when you stepped off the plane? I mean what was it like?

**JG:** My impression was that the city smelled. Everybody looked alike and they were talking in a funny language. And I thought they were talking about me.

**Q:** What was the temperature like? Was it hot? Humid?

**JG:** Oh yeah definitely hot and humid. Even in the winter. The monsoon season it was hot so it was like year round. But beautiful country. It was real green, it was beautiful.

**Q:** Now where were you stationed in Thailand?

**JG:** Ubon Air Base. Ubon Ratchathani Thailand.

**Q:** How far was that from Bangkok?

**JG:** Oh couple hundred miles. It was on the Laotian Cambodia border where they meet with Thailand, Laos and Cambodia meet.

**Q:** How did you get from Bangkok to Ubon?

**JG:** C-130. Military air-craft.

**Q:** What was that like for you at Ubon? Did it take a while to get settled in or did you basically start working right away? Was there any kind of transition at all?

**JG:** No there wasn't no transition. It was like you got right to work flying a lot of sorties over there. So the help was needed so it was all JT. Which was good.

**Q:** What was your regular typical work day like?

**JG:** Twelve hours a day, six days a week. I worked the day shift for a while then I went to the night shift. It was busy. It was a busy day, each and every day was busy.

**Q:** What time did the day start for you?

**JG:** I think it was six in the morning. You know six to six and then six to six. Everybody did twelve hour shifts.

**Q:** What was the food like there?

**JG:** Food was good. Remember it's the air force.

**Q:** What about, you said you worked six days a week, you got a day off?

**JG:** Yes

**Q:** Were you able to leave the base at all?

**JG:** Oh yeah. We'd go downtown and you know kick up our heels a little bit.

**Q:** Did you have any sort of entertainment like USO shows or anything like that?

**JG:** Yes we had the Bob Hope show come. Bob Hope, (inaudible) and a couple other guests here.

**Q:** You were there for the monsoon season?

**JG:** Yes

**Q:** Did it rain constantly there?

**JG:** Yes but the one thing about the monsoon is you can see it coming, you know. You look out and you can see it coming and when it gets right over you it pours, then it goes just like it came. It goes and then the heat will dry you right off so it was hot and humid.

**Q:** Did you have much contact at all with the Thai People?

**JG:** Yes. Yes I did

**Q:** You mentioned on your application that you did some TDY to Vietnam.

**JG:** Yes

**Q:** Did you want to tell us about that?

**JG:** Well when I got into specter squadron night owl C-130 gunships, I went with my plane wherever it went you know. If it went to Tan Son Nhut I'd go there, if it went to Cam Ranh Bay I'd go there. You know so, plus the base of operations for the C-130 gunships was Ubon and Ubon was a tactical Air Base but they had the C-130 gunship steel with many guns and you know web you know we go with the plan. So probably go with every shot up or something we go fix it and try to get it back to the base or whatever the case may be.

**Q:** Were you on like a lot of night missions mostly when you flew with the?

**JG:** Yes nights, days, whenever you know there was a job to do. But I think it was mainly to fly to retrieve airplanes if it was shot up or damaged or needed work to be done to fly back to base. You know so mainly like that, the mission status.

**Q:** How much time did you typically spend in Vietnam like on the ground?

**JG:** Oh wow it could range from two weeks you know at a clip you know it could range to a week. Whatever it takes to get you know that or the F-4 Phantom jets to come back to base. I might switch off to C-130 gunships and go to the F4 Phantoms. It depends on where im needed.

**Q:** Were you ever under fire at all on the ground or in the air?

**JG:** Well we had a zipper attack at Ubon. But in the year yes it was typical you know the C-130's. They went that fast they didn't fly that high like a B52 or whatever. So you know they were taking a lot of hits. Small arms fire stuff like that. Nothing amazing.

**Q:** Did you yourself have any close calls?

**JG:** No not really that I can think of. Just the plane being hit to something like that, you know, other than that. Remember I was in the air force. It wasn't like ground combat, nothing like that.

**Q:** Now what rank were you at that point?

**JG:** Airman First Class.

**Q:** Did you suffer from being over in that type of environment? Did you suffer from any type of tropical diseases like malaria or?

**JG:** No I got chronic gum. I suffer still today from PTSD myself, but still today chronic tropical skin fungi which I'm disabled with, service connection.

**Q:** What were your officers like?

**JG:** They were good you know. I worked on some F wars and stuff like that. Got to know some of the pilots, they trusted our word, my word but I always had a problem because when they go out on a sortie, some of them didn't come back. So you know I always question and think was it my mechanical skills or was it that they got shot down? Because nobody tells you anything so that I live with still today.

**Q:** You mentioned a sergeant Frank Bellamy. Do you want to tell about him?

**JG:** Oh Frank was a friend of mine that I met at Travis Air Force Base. See the troops were coming home they were throwing their uniforms in the garbage and Frank I were going over but I didn't know him until I got there and he was looking in the trash can and I said "man what are you looking in the trash can for" he said "I need a belt for my uniform" so we got to talking and we found out that we were going to the same place. So we sort of got tight and Frank died over there you know.

**Q:** Was he in a crash or?

**JG:** No no he worked in life support for the pilots. Where they scrap their guns and you know their stuff. He got killed downtown in Ubon in the VC village. And still today have trouble with that because he stopped at my bungalow, I had a bungalow downtown and he wanted me to go with him and I was too busy to go with him and that day he died. And I feel like I should have been with him and it wouldn't have happened.

**Q:** How long were you over there?

**JG:** A year.

**Q:** One year? Were you asked to extend or did you want to extend or did you have any choice in the matter?

**JG:** No well you know I gave a deep thought about extending but you know the war was going on, Frank died you know but uh at that time I wanted to, I was having trouble. That's when my PTSD kicked in.

**Q:** Now what year was that?

**JG:** 1971

**Q:** It was in seventy-one, okay so when you left Ubon and came back to the states whereabouts did you go into?

**JG:** Back to Travis Air Force Base.

**Q:** Travis okay. Were you discharged from Travis?

**JG:** Yes. I got an early out.

**Q:** How much of an early out did you get?

**JG:** A year.

**Q:** A year. When you came back of course in seventy-one there was still the anti-war movement going on. Did you run into any problems with you know being in uniform coming back to the states?

**JG:** Well when I came back, yes it wasn't a hero welcoming. There was nothing. You step outside the base of whatever, Travis then you got the anti-war movement going on and I didn't understand. I wanted to save this but because I was being drafted you know I opted to serve how I wanted to serve really. And I think that was a very very uncalled-for for the people. We did our duty you know we did our duty over there we didn't make the war, we didn't do any of that but we did what we had to do. We served our country. I come back and face that and you know that not just the protestors it ran into the friends, the families. You know everybody was stand-offish. They don't know what to expect. When I came back I wasn't debriefed. I came back and I was just let go. They let me go you know they didn't debrief me they didn't do anything. Just sent me from one extreme to the other. There was no adjustment period so life was a little odd.

**Q:** Once you were discharged, did you sign up for unemployment?

**JG:** Yes I did. For a while, then I went back to work for the state.

**Q:** Did you use the GI Bill at all?

**JG:** No.

**Q:** You said you went to work for the state, what did you do with them?

**JG:** Oh before I went in I was a nurse's aide what they called CPA's or something, I don't know what they call them today but nurse's aide. And when I came out I went back into there at unemployment but it didn't pan out because I was having problems adjusting.

**Q:** Were you working in a hospital?

**JG:** Yes

**Q:** Now did you keep in touch with any of the people you served with at all?

**JG:** Yes. One guy came to visit me but then that dissipated over time. You know we had our lives. He was from Newark I was from Poughkeepsie in New York so the contact just dissipated to nothing.

**Q:** Now when you went back to Poughkeepsie were you working at the St. Francis Hospital?

**JG:** No I was in the state hospital.

**Q:** Oh the state hospital okay. Did you join any Veterans organizations?

**JG:** No that came later. You know I was ignorant to a lot of things when I came back. You know nobody told you anything. I think that's why the condition of a lot of Vietnam vets are like they are today. Because nobody told them. I didn't learn about the DAV until about a year or something when I got out of service which was too late for a lot of things. Medical things and stuff like that because you were supposed to have reported it, documented it thirty days or something after you get out of the military and they don't tell anybody this and now today it's catching up. It's catching up and that's what's happening with a lot of veterans like the PTSD and stuff like that. Things that were unrecognizable and just being recognized now.

**Q:** How do you think your time in the service changed or affected your life? Obviously as you mentioned that there are a lot of issues that you know you weren't prepared for, benefits and such that they never talked about. Do you think it had a significant bearing on where your life went once you got out of the service?

**JG:** Yes it did. In my case I don't think that they diagnosed the PTSD as they should have. The pains and aches and arthritis working on them planes up in Plattsburgh coming out of extreme cold weather into the hot weather and the effect it would have on my skin. A lot of things, agent orange well you know if I had known back then that these things effects, that these ailments would catch up with me later in life I would have done something about it back then. But uh they never told the effects of what was going on over there. Not only me, other veterans too.

**Q:** How long have you been here in Ballston Spa?

**JG:** Two years almost. April will be two years.

**Q:** Is there anything we haven't touched on that you'd like to talk about at this time?

**JG:** Yes I got two beautiful kids

**Q:** Okay great, and what are their names?

**JG:** Autumn Joy and Jahnel (Janell?)David.

**Q:** How old are they?

**JG:** Fourteen and sixteen. She's sixteen and he's fourteen.

**Q:** Well thank you very much for your participation and welcome home.

**JG:** Thank you very much.