

**James Richard Cook
Veteran**

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Interviewers**

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Q: Could you please state your name and rank?

JC: James R. Cook, my former rank was Staff Sergeant (E5), instructor and platoon sergeant.

Q: Where did you grow up?

JC: I grew up in Utica, New York.

Q: Did you have any brothers and sisters?

JC: I am the oldest of seven.

Q: What was your main reason for enlisting?

JC: That's a tough question. I fought during the Second World War, a lot of us did. When we were starting our third year of high school, about ten of us joined the National Guard. Why did we join? I really can't remember, but we knew that probably it was the thing to do.

Q: How was your basic training?

JC: We had a lot of basic training, [at the time of the breakout] of the Korean War, I was a Private First Class in the New York Army National Guard. Our training was substantial because our [First Sergeant and Master Sergeant] were both combat veterans at the Battle of the Bulge in World War II in Europe. And they were *extremely tough, tough*, sergeants.

Q: How long were you on active duty?

JC: My total enlistment was three years, three months, and seventeen days. I enlisted for three years.

Q: Could you tell us about the radar section?

JC: The range patrol, electronically and visually, were the controlling eyes and firing mechanism for the four 90mm anti-aircraft cannons.

Q: How did you and your family feel about the Korean War?

JC: I'm not sure exactly how they felt, I know the day I left that my mother was in the hospital delivering her sixth child. She was assured now because when I was called to

active duty that I was still going to be too young to go into combat, but I didn't talk about it with her, I thought that it would need no words.

Q: When you were in Korea, was there a shortage of food?

JC: If you look into my reply, you're going to find out that I was not able to go to Korea. After we went on active duty, we were in advanced combat training for seventeen months. I volunteered for combat four, five, six, or seven times, I really don't recall. Finally, my First Sergeant put a stop to it, along with the battery commander, who was a regular Army Captain, and they said that they had me where the Army needed me most, as an instructor, and then as a range platoon sergeant.

Q: When you were assigned as Platoon Sergeant of the radar section, you said you were MOS 1725. What does that mean?

JC: Military Occupational Specialty.

Q: How many men did you command?

JC: When I was a Platoon Sergeant, about thirty-four.

Q: What were their duties?

JC: Well, there were [three] sections. The first section was where I started off; the radar section. That was a van, a tractor-trailer that would pull over the road, and they had an elevator in the center of it, which hoisted up the radar satellite dish, and the van was full of high-voltage electronic equipment

Q: Did you have any serious injuries during military service?

JC: Only one. My head connected to a steel eye beam, that hoisted the satellite dish, due to an elevator glitch that put me out of action for about a month. It took me about a month to be able to maintain consciousness.

Q: Did you meet anyone you really look up to during the war?

JC: Originally, when ten of us joined the National Guard, I would have to say our First Sergeant or our Master Sergeant, who were both combat veterans in the European Theater in World War II. They were very commanding, they were our father, and our mother, and our priest..., and our Sergeant.

Q: Did you receive any decorations for your service?

JC: Not that I know of.

Q: Did you feel connected to the people who were with you in the service?

JC: Very much. We learned to live together, work together, eat together, sleep together, living conditions were not always what you folks might know today. There were many amounts of time where there was no heat, an inadequate amount of food, a shortage of milk, butter, sugar, meat, or we would go weeks or months without any, here in the United States.

Q: What do you remember the best?

JC: I remember the companionship, the thirty-four men, or the one-hundred and sixty-eight that we had in our battery, that we worked as one and were probably ready to die as one. Although, I don't know that any of us were looking forward to dying.

Q: Did you do any unusual military service?

JC: I think that I would like to refer that to a story near the end of our interview if I might.

Q: How much education did you get before you went off to war?

JC: I was four weeks short of graduating from high school. We did have the option of deferment in order to graduate, but we knew that, for one thing, that our files would be handed over to the local draft board, we would probably be put in the infantry, regardless of our background, but most of all, we had made an obligation when we enlisted to our military and our government, so we felt that we needed to go. That was the choice every one of us made.

Q: Did the war change your life in any way?

JC: I think the best way to put that would be... there's not anything in the universe that I would take for the time that I spent in the Army of the United States. There is nothing. I would not exchange it for anything.

Q: Did you find employment after the service?

JC: Yes, I did. I was educated in the trades, as a mason, as an electrician, and as a craftsman, but we were running out of money, once we got paid, it would not last very long. The contractor that I was waiting for took them up from Florida in the spring. I didn't have any money left so I went to the Veterans' Administration at the unemployment office, and they found me a job at what was then [Hudson], became [Mohawk], and it has now become National Grid, where I served forty years as a linker, [test] alignment, and a crew chief.

Q: Do you support the current war in Iraq?

JC: I had suspected that you would ask me a question like that as we discuss the wars of the 20th Century and I was going to expand back to the Civil War and then come ahead into the 21st Century and talk about the war in Iraq. I would [never] consider myself a peace maker, nor do I view myself as a war hawk. I am absolutely for a strong military defense. I do not agree, under any consideration, of preemptive invasion of another nation.

Do I support the war in Iraq? That could imply a number of things. Do I support our troops? Absolutely. I would do anything to make their lives better and easier, through taxes, through whatever method that we might use. But do I support the way the war was entered in to? No, I do not.

As I said, to back that up again, I believe we have the strongest military defense in the world. Don't tread on us. An old Marine Corps remark and as far as I'm concerned, we've gone too far. We have seriously damaged our relationships in the world among other nations because of this war in Iraq.

Q: What advice would you give to our own troops that are headed to Iraq?

JC: I don't know, because it's sad. I suspect that their all trained. I suspect that the regular Army forces and Marines that are there are extremely well trained. I would suspect that the National Guard units and the reserve units, of which I am very familiar with their conditioning, perhaps could have used more severe training, equal that to our regular forces.

What advice would I give them? There is nothing I can say lightly. I hope that God is on their side. I hope that God watches over them, especially.

Q: Do you have any closing remarks, things that we didn't cover, that you would like to touch upon?

JC: Well, I would like to speak about my [military record]. Jim Cook is not a hero. And like other folks, has made his share of mistakes in his life.

After being discharged for a while, and having to send my military records out for certain issues, there is something on the back of my military record that states: "Not recommended for the good conduct medal." I did not apply for the good conduct medal. I spoke in my answers to your questionnaire one said, "What officers did you admire?" Every group of people in the world are made up of human beings, and they fall out on a scale from right, to the left. And I don't mean conservative and liberal necessarily. There are some men at that time, there were no women in the armed forces, that were not capable of promoting good leadership. Perhaps for a moment, I wasn't either. When I was a Corporal, we'd been out on maneuvers for five weeks. We'd had no toilet facilities, no heating, it was winter time, no hot food, no coffee, no nothing. We dug holes in the ground and lived. For our 90mm cannons, we had small bulldozers that would help dig the ground to bury them and enforce them.

Near the end of the five weeks, the First Sergeant came through, with obviously a Second Lieutenant, and he was making some negative remarks on our performance. We did not know that we had a new battery commander. We came in, as I remember, on a Thursday afternoon, into our regular base at Camp Edwards, Massachusetts, cleaned our equipment, it took us about a day and a half to do it, got ourselves back up to standards. And, on Friday afternoon, found out the battery was restricted for the weekend, even though we all had class a liberty passes that could go through the main gate without any questions. But, we were restricted for the weekend, which we didn't agree with, but there was nothing we could do about it. And as the Friday afternoon wore through, we found out that there were members of the battery that were getting weekend passes because they were going into the commander's office and relating sob stories to him and he was foolishly approving them. This fellow was a nineteen-year-old Second Lieutenant and I've gone to a war using a word that they might use in the Navy, but the troops were wanting to know, what I was going to do as a Section Leader? I went down to see the First Sergeant and the First Sergeant informed me that I was not going to see the battery commander. So, I went back.

A number of us in the battery, about one-hundred and sixty-five men, went home for the weekend. They pulled a 0200-hour bed check on Sunday morning. Everyone that was not in their bunk was considered absent without leave. So, I lost two days; eighty-four of us lost two days, under that article, the Saturday and the Sunday. Certainly not duty time for any one of us. But we left, under a restriction. When we came in for noon chow, on Monday [noon], I opened the back door of the barracks, and saw the bulletin board and right away I knew that there was something on the bulletin board that I didn't like. As I walked up to look at it, there were court martial charges, filed against eighty-four of the men in our battery. I was the senior non-commissioned officer. Everyone that had rank was [demoted] down to Private. Those who did not have rank had two week's restriction and cleaning duties.

Today, when I look back on that, it's not anything to be proud of at all. In fact, after that there [were] some openings in the 664th AAA battalion that was going to Austria. I went down to the First Sergeant to get my release papers and transfer papers to the 664th, and he gave them to me. By the way, we all had the right to request a court martial. No one would request a court martial. We knew we were wrong and we had to take it on the chin that's where it had to hit. So, I packed up my gear, took the first bus, went across the post, and got to the 664th, and there was no room left. So, back to the 336th I went.

The First Sergeant, besides being a father, and a mother, and a priest, and a combat veteran, wanted to know, what was I doing back there? He didn't have the answer to that question. He said, take it to your barracks. Later in the afternoon, I got a call from the battery clerk saying that the First Sergeant wanted to see me. I went down, reported in, and then he said, the battery commander would like to see you. And I thought to myself, "Oh my God, the nineteen-year-old ninety-day wonder, where am I going to go?" So, the First Sergeant took me to the commander's room, and here was a man who was about forty years old, had Captain's bars on his shoulders, and boy, did I snap to, and he said, "Cook, I've been going through your file." And he said, "I don't see any reason why that if you made it once, that you couldn't make it again." In thirty days, I was called down to the orderly room, I was given a PFC stripe, and something I had never, never wanted in all of my military life. It was a red band and it had a word on my left arm with corporal stripes on it. They called those guys Hollywood actors. And if you could survive a term as Hollywood actor in the service, you were really something. So that's what I did. I sewed my PFC stripe back on, put the red band on, I had some difficulty during that period, and I got the living hell beat out of me by a guy three times my size, from another outfit, for being a Hollywood John. I couldn't beat him, I couldn't land a hit, but he couldn't keep me down. And every time he hit me and I went down, I got up. We never saw him again after that; he got shipped out. I have no idea where they sent Jim.

About four months later, I got a call to the orderly room to see the Captain, Captain Ralph Dessler. And he said, "[Corporal]," "You have an appointment to go before the brigade board to be examined to become Staff Sergeant." By the way, before I got busted, I would be going before that board in about five weeks, because I was already in line for Staff Sergeant. I did a lot of wrong, and said, "I would like to tell you something. When you go before the board, if they ask you a question that you don't have the answer for," and he said I'd like to give you a hand. He said, "You tell them, 'I don't know

where, sir, but I'm ordered to find out." So, one day, soon after that I went before the 35th Brigade board, low and behold this was my battery commander on the board, down on the end. Low and behold, if the one-star General doesn't ask me a question that I didn't know, but I know where the answer was. I said, "I don't know sir, but I know where to find it in the articles of order." And I could see that thrill come over my commander's face.

Within a week, our temporary Platoon Sergeant shipped out, and the First Sergeant said that they were coming up to our barracks to work at eight o'clock in the morning, and to follow up with [], and we followed up with [], and he took my place as section leader. And the captain and the First Sergeant pulled up to the formation, and the First Sergeant gave the yell, "Cook, front and center." And the Captain said, "Sergeant Cook, why aren't you at the front of your formation?" I said, "Because I am not the Platoon Sergeant, sir." Captain Dessler said, "I think you've learned that those stripes can come off a lot faster than they go on." [I said, with a salute], "Yes, sir. Thank you, sir. My new assignment, drill sergeant." Eighteen years old. Youngest guy, the average age was about twenty-one to twenty-two. And after the First Sergeant and Captain got out of sight, I want to tell you, there was some hip hip hooray's, and then we went on about our business.

Am I sorry that I did that, what I did? Yeah, it was a foolhardy mistake. If you had asked Jim Cook, would he ever want to go in front of a military court martial, in summary, I'd rather walk through Hell than go through a court martial. But something they left me with, has been like, a measure, a level, or maybe a guiding light that has stayed with me all of my life. Spending forty years in the electric utility, spending now over fifty years as a trade union activist, it has kept me honest, it has helped to keep me honest, and has helped me to do my work the correct way. It has made, perhaps I might say a professional human being. If my dad didn't teach me well enough, and I heartily believe that, that was a tough lesson learned.

Would I let that happen to me again? I'd rather doubt it.

Q: Anything else?

JC: Well, I did bring a couple of items with me. [When you've got] a record that's in your home tenuously for over fifty years and says that you're not eligible for the good conduct medal...those are the words. Those were worse than the court martial. Those were worse than a bust down to Private. Those were worse than losing my opportunity, much, much earlier, to become Staff Sergeant.

So, I brought a couple of items with me that I would share with you. And one is a proclamation that is registered in the Congress of the United States, that was given to me by our Congressman in 1993. And, I am not going to read the words. [It rather], makes me feel quite good. It talks about my being a Platoon Sergeant. Pretty good for this guy to crash in his short military career. And then, I received one last year, in 2003, that perhaps, I will read, and it's from the AFL-CI, the American Federation of Labor, and the Congress of Industrial Organizations. I am a retired member of the International [board] of electrical workers, and I would like to read this to you.

Present by the AFL-CIO Central New York Labor Council
The 28th of April, 2003, to James R. Cook
In grateful appreciation of your legacy
Past President of the Labor Council
Outstanding union member of our community
You have helped build a better place in which to live, work and raise our children
Patrick J. Costello, President

Now, that does not take the words off my military record. But, when I receive this, I was close to being speechless. And, that's a tragic event for a guy of Irish ancestry.

Q: Thank you very much,

JC: You're very welcome.