

James Bly
Narrator

Heather Theme
Interviewer

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Rome Free Academy
Rome, New York

Q: My name is Heather Theme. My camera person is Felicia Anderson. We are interviewing Jamie Bly. Today is the 11th of January and the location is RFA (Rome Free Academy).

Can you please state your name, branch of service and rank?

A: James Bly. United States Air Force. I retired as a Master Sergeant – an E-7.

Q: Where and when were you born?

A: I was born in Elmira, New York, August 23rd, 1948.

Q: What was your pre-service education?

A: I graduated from high school and I went into the Air Force right after high school.

Q: When did you enter the service?

A: August 13th, 1966.

Q: Did you enlist or were you drafted?

A: I enlisted. In fact, I enlisted when I was seventeen. I never even had a draft card.

Q: Why did you join the Air Force?

A: I have a lot of family that had been in the military. My father was in the old Army Air Corps. I had uncles in the Air Force and I knew back when I was in middle school really that I wanted to go into the Air Force.

Q: Where did you receive your basic training?

A: At Lackland Air Force Base, San Antonio, Texas.

Q: What was your specific training?

A: After basic training, I went to radio maintenance school in Mississippi and that was about 35 weeks of training on repairing of aircraft radios.

Q: What was your unit?

A: Initial Unit? After my training, I was assigned to the 509th Bomb Wing at Pease Air Force Base which is in Portsmouth, New Hampshire.

Q: How would you rate your training and equipment?

A: Well, the training was excellent. The people that provided the training had many years of experience doing what we were doing – the repair work. Then, they went on to become instructors in it. It was quite intense. We had to really be able to perform those duties before we could do the job.

Q: What was the first place you were stationed at?

A: Portsmouth. At Pease Air Force Base, I was assigned to the airborne radio maintenance shop.

Q: Did you have any combat experience?

A: Yes. In 1969 and 1970, I was all over Southeast Asia.

Q: How did you feel during combat?

A: Well, I think like everybody scared to some extent. Being in the Air Force and the job that I was doing, we weren't on the ground in combat per se like the Army or the Marines but in our flying duties there were many times that we would have the North Vietnamese MiGs take off and come chase us out of where we were and things like that. When something like that happened, it got a little bit scarier.

Q: What sort of medals or awards did you receive?

A: During my period in Viet Nam along with the campaign medals and things for being in Viet Nam, I was awarded three air medals for aerial flight. I had somewhere over seventy combat missions that I flew. After that time period, commendation medals, meritorious service medals like that.

This is just a shadow box that my wife had made up for me (shows a display of many medals) showing the different medals and the different badges and things that I wore.

When I was flying combat, I received my flight wings – combat flight wings. I spent time working with missile systems. I was on a specialized type of an aircraft. We worked with missile systems and computers and things. That's what some of the other badges were.

This pin right here (points to one of the pins) was when I was a recruiter. I spent time as an Air Force recruiter. So, that was kind of a way to sum up my career in the Air Force.

Q: When you were stationed overseas, how did you keep in touch with those at home?

A: Letter writing. Lots of letter writing. The other way, when I was over there, I was married so my wife and I both had tape recorders and we would do tape recordings and send them to each other. Not even cassettes, they were little tape reels. We would record them and send them back and forth to each other.

Q: What were the food and supplies like?

A: As far as the Air Force goes, pretty good. We always ate pretty good and especially being on a flight crew I think we got even a little bit better food. I don't think there was anything that I didn't particularly like to eat. It was always well prepared. I did well by it.

A: What was your most memorable experience in your military career?

Q: My most memorable experience. I would say after the Viet Nam war when the Prisoners of War were released and they came back to the states. They spent some down time. They were going to school and everything.

About two years after they came back, I got to know a few of them very very well. To listen to their experiences. To see their outlook on life. It was a wonderful experience and I think a lot of the things I have done since then and the things that I do today are based on some insight I gained about life and things like that from talking to them.

Q: How did you feel about your military experience as a whole?

A: As a whole, it was fantastic. I did serve twenty years. I retired from the Air Force. As I said previously, when I was young, I wanted to go in the Air Force and I had in the back of my mind that I wanted to make it a career. I did make it a career and there was nothing that I ever regretted in what I had done. I experienced so many things and got to know so many people. I had opportunities to change jobs to try other things. It was just fantastic. Not talking about sometimes when you had to work 24 hours or 36 hours straight or some of the conditions when you were flying. Family separation. They weren't that great. If you were looking at it as an overall experience, it was just fantastic.

Q: What were the dates that you were stationed in Viet Nam?

A: I got there in March of 1969 and I left in June of 1970.

Q: What were your relationships with the Vietnamese population?

A: We had some contact but not a lot. We spent most of our time away from everything else because of our mission, because of our aircraft. But, when I did have an opportunity to go into the towns and things like that, I very much enjoyed it. I found that the Vietnamese people were really no different than anybody else except that they happened to be in the middle of the war.

You would think that there's a big language problem and in some cases there were but for the most part the Vietnamese learned to speak enough English so we could understand

them. We tried as much as we could to try to learn the basic Vietnamese terms so we could at least get what we were looking for or go where we wanted to go and have them understand it.

Q: What about the South Vietnamese soldiers?

A: The contact that I had with South Vietnamese soldiers, I think I was impressed. They were working under some terrible conditions. I don't think many people had much confidence in them. You never knew whether they were South Vietnamese or really North Vietnamese. The ones I had contact with, I was impressed. They were military people for the most part just like we were. Some of them I'm sure were drafted into the service and some of them probably joined because they wanted to. As soldiers, I was impressed.

Q: Describe the relationships with the different races within your unit.

A: We had a number of ethnic groups within the unit that I flew with. I think most of them were African American. Relations were good. When we look back at our history and see all the problems like in the south and in the inner cities and things like that, when we get to the military, it isn't necessarily like that. I've seen people that have prejudices but in a military unit especially a combat unit that's your brother. He's watching your back. You're watching his back. You don't see color. You don't see religious background. You see a brother.

Q: What about the government officials. What was your relationship with them?

A: We did what they told us to do. Politicians are politicians. Some set our directions. Some of them have a clue as to what they are doing. Some of them, I don't believe do. Some of them are just politicians. There are some people that have military backgrounds. For the most part military people see that because the way they act you can see that military background. They have more of an idea of what's going on in the military.

Q: What was your reaction to the replacement of Westmorland?

A: Unfortunately, I think when a general gets to that point; he's part military and half political. Westmorland had a tough job to do. He was doing what he could to affect a positive military outcome but in a lot of respects he was constrained by our government. To some extent, information that he gave our government was information that the government was looking for and not maybe necessarily the facts, the truth. He was in a tough place. He was a soldier that cared about his soldiers but when you've got your hands tied behind your back it's tough.

Q: What did you think of Richard Nixon? Did you vote?

A: I have always voted. Yes ma'am. I voted for Nixon. I felt that Nixon was the best choice at that time. I was happy with a lot of things that Nixon did. Sometimes I had my doubts. Even when he ran the second time, I voted for him the second time. Even with all his problems, I don't know maybe we're cynical at times, but most people said he just got caught doing what most presidents have done also. To some extent, I agree with that. For the most part he was doing, I think, what he thought was best. I can't fault anybody for doing that.

Q: In what part of Viet Nam did you serve? Did terrain and climate affect the battle situations?

A: Again, with my particular job – I flew. Other than flying in and out of Viet Nam, my aircraft were actually stationed in Thailand. We were in Taiwan for a while. We flew out of Okinawa for a while.

What we would do, we would launch our aircraft and fly down to the Gulf of Tonkin and we would fly our missions in the Gulf of Tonkin. We flew a race track pattern up over the Gulf and we provided communication links to ground, naval and air units.

If there were emergencies; if there was a plane which was shot down, we would make sure that we relayed all those messages so everybody knew what was going on.

The only time we had to worry about weather was if there was a typhoon or something in the area or things like that. For the most part it didn't bother communications and we were usually up high enough that there weren't any problems like there were on the ground.

Q: What types of aircraft did you fly?

A: Primarily EC-135's which is like the civilian Boeing 707. It's a four engine jet. The EC-135 was an electronics aircraft with thousands and thousands of pounds of communications equipment. Not only did it have its crew of four but usually there were anywhere from four to fifteen crew members in the back working all of the equipment.

Q: How did you feel about the rotation system when you were there?

A: As an individual, I liked the rotation system. That meant that I was going to spend a year, year and a half and come home. From a military point of view, from a point of view of a country going in fighting a war, like with World War II, you went to where you were going and you were there until it was over or until you died or were wounded and had to leave. So, I think the rotation system individually was good. From a military standpoint, it wasn't a sound idea. Just when you would start getting used the routine of what you were doing, it would be time to leave. They'd bring in somebody brand new and they would have to learn all over again.

Q: What people do you remember most from your service?

A: I remember a number of supervisors when I was first in the Air Force because they provided a lot of leadership and a lot of fatherly type image bringing me along and helping me to learn my job – how to do it, making me think about how I'm doing it.

As I went along in service, then some of my commanders and in the same light and again the POWs that I met that I got to know and really getting an insight on what life is really all about. And some of the comrades that I was with day in and day out that I flew with, that I lived with and all of those things.

There are a number of them even today, thirty some years later that I correspond with. I talk with them. There is nothing like combat to make you a very close knit family. We never thought about it back then but with all of the stuff that's been in the movies- Band of Brothers – that's a very true statement because you are closer than your family after you have lived with these people for a long time. Many of them impressed me. These weren't just kids off the street doing something for a few years and going home. There was a dedication there and it was impressive.

Q: How did you feel about the peace movement or the draft resisters?

A: (pause) That's what the military fights for – for their right to do that. I think if the military had the chance, the military would be right out there with the peace protestors too because there is no one any more strongly that does not want war. When war happens, we were the ones that were out there doing the fighting. We were the ones out there dying.

So, did we resent them? Yeah, probably, I would say so. We always referred to a lot of them as a bunch of spoiled college kids that as long as they protested and draft dodged they could go out drinking, partying and carrying on. But, they had every right to do that and I firmly believe that to this day, we'll defend their right to do that.

The draft dodgers – those that went to Canada – I know President Ford pardoned them and let them come home. As far as I'm concerned, they could have stayed in Canada. That went a little bit beyond. That was something that was illegal I guess I would want to say. It's hard to say sometimes where to draw the line. Who was really against war? Who were the conscientious objectors? Who were the ones still trying to stay out of it? But what happens, happens and life goes on.

Q: Was American involvement in Viet Nam justified?

A: Yes. I think so. I think so. I think ever since World War II, this country has taken on – the term used is – that policeman image, world police image. We go in places because we can. I think because we have the power to do so and I don't necessarily mean military

power but economic power. We, as a country, see ourselves as trying to help those that can't help themselves.

Whether it was in Korea or Viet Nam, we've taken on that role and I think 99% of the time we have tried to justifiably provide a positive influence in those places.

We have not gone to war to take over other countries to dominate to say that now we control this. As much as possible, we go in, we do what we can do and we get out. We try to leave it to the people there then to get their lives back on track. We're doing that right now.

Q: Explain the different jobs you had and the different countries you were stationed in.

A: As I said earlier, I started out in aircraft radio repair. I did that in New Hampshire at Pease Air Force Base for about a year and a half. I went back to technical school to learn some other equipment – computer repair – and at that point, I was stationed in Omaha, Nebraska. I was maintaining communications and computer equipment on the EC-135. This was with the Strategic Air Command – a unit that doesn't exist anymore.

Our aircraft was the airborne command post called “Looking Glass” and that was an aircraft that was for many years in the air twenty four hours a day, seven days a week. What that aircraft was there for was that if, during the Cold War, the Russians attacked us with nuclear missiles our aircraft from the air could take over command of all the Air Force inventory. (It would) handle all the bombers and things. We had the computers. We could launch all the underground missiles from the air. That was a pretty awesome responsibility.

Where I tied into that was the communications equipment and computers that would launch those missiles I had to make sure were maintained. We had an in-flight repair capability. If something stopped working, we could fix it right there on the airplane. So, we would stay viable.

From Omaha – that was in '69, '68 and '69 – at that point, I went overseas to South East Asia. Primarily most of the time, I was actually stationed in Taiwan. That's where our primary base was. Then we would fly out of sometimes Thailand, sometimes out of Viet Nam. Most of the time, we would fly (out of) there. They were twelve or thirteen hour missions.

It would take us about an hour and a half to two hours to get to our mission area. We would fly and do our thing and go back.

After that, in June of '70, I was stationed in Ellsworth Air Force Base in South Dakota. Again, the same airplane and the same type of functions. We would be there for communications.

After that, in 1972, I came to Geneva, New York where I was a recruiter for four years. I was looking for young people that were interested in joining the Air Force getting a career and maybe learning something and being able to use what they learned.

After that, that was 1975, I went back out to South Dakota. I was stationed out there again. At that time, because of an accident that I had as a volunteer fireman, I couldn't do that job anymore. I couldn't lift equipment. So, I ended up going into Medical Administration. Out at Ellsworth, I worked at Medical Administration at the hospital there.

In 1979, I came here to the "Grif" and I was here from '79 to '86 when I retired. While I was here, I was in Medical Administration and then I also spent four years as a PME instructor – Professional Military Education. I taught leadership and communication skills to new supervisors.

In 1986, I retired. I spent a few years out of there and then I found out that many states had state defense forces and I joined the state defense force which I am still in – which is a state military organization. And I am here!

Q: At which base did you feel you learned the most or experience the most?

A: Probably my assignment to South East Asia and again primarily we were stationed in Taiwan. It was CCK Air Base – a Chinese Air Force Base. Simply because the year and a half that I spent there, the intense stuff that we did, the combat that we did that was probably my most memorable experience.

Q: What do you consider your most valuable reward?

A: Probably knowing the people that I know and having a real positive outlook on life because of my experiences and I think maybe the ability to pass that on to people. I sound like my recruiting days, but to show that that military has a lot to offer to people.

Q: How old were you when you finally arrived home from Viet Nam?

A: I think I was twenty when I came back from Viet Nam – yes, about twenty.

Q: What was your welcome like?

A: Fortunately, I was still in the military. When I flew back, I came back on a military aircraft and we landed at a military base. I immediately went on leave and came home for a month. I didn't have the wonderful "welcome" that a lot of other vets got because they would hit like San Francisco, they'd get off the airplane and they would be discharged. There they were among all those peace protestor and things like that. I had some friends that went through that I don't think I would have cared for the reception that they got.

I was still in the military so I went right back to my military stuff. The homecoming I got was from my family when I got back home and that was a pretty good experience.

Q: So you didn't take a break in between missions?

A: No, other than my thirty day leave that I took. I stayed right with it and just kept right on going.

Q: Do you belong to any veteran's organizations?

A: Yes. Name it. I belong to it. The VFW, The American Legion, Air Force Sergeant's Association, Non-Commissioned Officers Association, Air Force Association, Viet Nam Veteran's Association. Yes I do. I don't actively participate much because I do have a full time job. I am pretty busy but I have life memberships in most of them and I figure that when I get to the point when I fully retire then I will probably become more active with some of those groups.

Q: What sort of Viet Nam movies have you seen and what were your reactions to them?

A: I think I've see all of them. My earliest recollection I think was "Platoon". There was a lot of controversy over "Platoon". It tried to combine every negative thing that happened to any soldier in Viet Nam all into one movie which wasn't reality. It wasn't valid. But if you picked a part and said, yes knew that happened and that happened but beyond that it (unclear) more and more and more.

The last Viet Nam movie that I saw was "We Were Soldiers" which was to me probably the ultimate military film as close to reality as possible. It was based on a true story. The technical advisor was the guy that Mel Gibson played. I thought it very well depicted the military. What I liked even better was the depiction of the military family back home and the things that they went through – just fantastic.

For the most part, the movies are Hollywood movies. We know that they can do anything they want with those.

Q: Have you visited the (Viet Nam) Wall in Washington, D.C.?

A: Yes, I did. It took me awhile to go. I had a lot of apprehension. As a teacher, in 1993 or 1994, I took a group of kids to Washington for a three day field trip. That was one of the places that tour went to. I made that trip. Awesome experience. Awesome experience.

You can't describe to anybody else what it is about it except there's something about it. To understand it and then to find names of people that you knew that you were stationed with. It's awesome. It's awesome.

There's a little bit of irony I guess. The girl that designed it was a Vietnamese girl – fantastic.

There's nothing that I have found that compares to that memorial in bringing out emotion. You're almost awestruck. The government has had to spend millions of dollars on warehousing for all the artifacts and mementos that are left there. It's just unbelievable. It does something to everybody. That's something that everybody should experience once.

Q: How did your military experience change or influence your life?

A: To start with, it really gave me a sense of direction. As I said earlier, I came right out of high school at seventeen years old and joined the military. I wasn't even an adult yet. I hadn't formed any lifelong things or anything. It really gave me a sense of direction and sense of purpose. My different experiences led me into the career that I am in now.

I have no problem being able to sit back and trying to analyze things and understand things, understand people, accept people without just being prejudice against people before getting to know who they are first. Then, if they're jerks, then I can call them jerks. It doesn't matter who we are, what we look like or what our religion is, we're either a good person or we're a jerk. I think the military really gave me that ability to sit back and do that to evaluate people on who they are not what they look like.

Q: Are there any specific stories that you want to share?

A: Humorous also?

Q: Yes.

A: When I first got into the Airborne Command Post field which was at Offutt (Air Base) in Nebraska that was the headquarters of Strategic Air Command. That's where the "Looking Glass" plane flew out of. All of the others were relayed but that was the main plane.

When it was up, as I said, that could launch the missiles and everything. There's a General officer that flies on there – a one or two star General. He's the top guy.

The head of the Strategic Command we refer to him as the CINC or CINCSAC – Commander in Chief. He was the top General. He was a four star General.

On one particular mission after I had just arrived there – I wasn't even flying yet. I was just learning the job – the CINCSAC General Dougherty, I believe, was going to be the General on board.

The plane takes about three hours to prepare for flight. During this time period, there's missile codes and there's all kinds of things. It's a very highly secured area. It's roped off

and there's security guards with their guns. You've got to have an ID card. You've got to be on an access list – all this stuff or you don't get on the airplane.

I was working the midnight shift. I came in. That plane was already supposed to have taken off but the General – of course, everybody waits on the General – had another meeting that he was at so he was late. I came on shift and we were told that we were pre-flighting an airplane getting it ready to fly. Nobody had said it had been pre-flighted and everything but we have to be out there and stand by.

We went out on a maintenance truck and for as little as I knew when we preflight an airplane, I get off the truck, I go on the airplane and there's certain things that I do.

I got off the truck. The security guards let us on the plane and I started doing the things that I need to do.

One of the things is there is a tape reader that gets the computers ready to get all their codes and everything so it works. So, I put a maintenance tape in and I start this thing up so I can get it to “zero” so they can build it up.

All of the sudden, there's these guys running from the backs of the plane. They've got guns out and I'm in a world of hurt. They immediately hustle me off the aircraft.

As they are taking me off the aircraft, here comes the General so he can go fly except now he's not going to be able to fly because I just wiped everything out of the computers. They had already been loaded, they were already to go; they were just waiting for the General.

I get taken back to the maintenance shop and I'm getting grilled. I'm getting asked all kinds of questions.

I never heard another thing about it after that night. A month later, I was on my way to Viet Nam after only about five or six months at Offutt. I don't know how I got there so quick but I think it was arranged.

When I got off the truck, the security guard had an access list. The access list that they had was for the people that had already left the work. I was not on the access list. I was not even allowed to get on the airplane. When I got on the airplane and I got to this tape reader, there's supposed to be an officer up there with his weapon guarding this area.

Because he had been waiting for a couple of hours, they were all in the back sitting back and having coffee and talking. So, I did that.

There were so many people higher up than me that got in trouble that I was the least of everything. That's probably my most humorous story.

I guess the next closest one was when I was in South East Asia; we had an aircraft take off. At the end of the airfield – this was on the Chinese base – there was a nine hole golf course. The plane took off and one of the engines fell off and almost made a hole in one.

We live by humor because a lot of the other stuff we don't talk about, we don't like to talk about. Humor is always present.

Q: Since you retired, how are the jobs that you have had compared to those overseas or your military job?

A: After I retired, I became a teacher and I'm a teacher today. Is it as dangerous as my military duties? No. Is it more important? To me, I think yes. What I do is extremely important now. I work with seven and eighth graders and it's an awesome responsibility.

It doesn't hold the same thing as the military duties but this is big. Also, as I said before, I'm in the state defense force here in New York. We provide support to the Air National Guard. We do duties. That's pretty awesome. That's unique.

When 9/11 hit, I was on active duty for the state for almost a year doing duty here in New York. So, I've kept my fingers in the military side of it.

Q: What advice or words of wisdom would you give to anyone about to join the military?

A: I would counsel anyone that a few years in the military would probably benefit them. You learn discipline. You learn structure. If you have even just a couple of years in the military, you come out as a mature adult.

I see kids going off to college and that first semester at college is party 101. There is no structure. They're away from home for the first time. It's great. They love it. That's fine, I guess as long as they can buckle down but, the military can teach so much. For a lot of kids who are not going to college, this gives them an opportunity to learn some skills.

Even the down side of it, the combat side of it, 99% of the kids, very important and the military can really give them direction.

While I was in the military, I got three Associates Degrees, my Bachelor's Degree and my Master's Degree. That's the last thing I was – an “uneducable” individual when I came out of high school. It gives everyone such an advantage I think. Even kids getting out of the military after a few years, employers look at those people much better than they do kids just coming out of high school or even just college because they know what that military background means. So, absolutely, I would suggest that everybody look at it.

Q: Thank you.

