

**James Cartwright
Veteran**

**Bill Payne
Interviewer**

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Q: Can you tell us, were you drafted or did you enlist?

JC: Well, I enlisted instead of being drafted. I dropped out of college and continued for about a month I was drafted.

Q: And you did enlist in the Air Force. Why did you pick the Air Force?

JC: I was kind of torn between the Air Force and the Navy, but I wanted to go into schooling. I wanted to go to an electronics school. So I chose the Air Force on that one.

Q: Where were you living at the time?

JC: In Schenectady with my parents.

Q: Did you record your first day of service and how it started out?

JC: We were flown down to Lackland Air Force Base in Texas. That's where basic was. I just remember it was misery, it was cold, it was winter and I didn't realize that Texas would be that cold.

Q: What was it like when you got there then, in boot camp?

JC: Anyone in boot camp would understand what it was like. Guess it was a culture shock. I was in physically good shape, thank god. Some of the people weren't, but I was in pretty good shape, I used to run cross-country and track in high school and it hadn't been that long after high school. I hadn't had a hard time with the physical end of it, but mental, usually when they run you through the trials and they push you in there and give you the tear gas treatment and all that kind of stuff, I sure didn't like any of that.

Q: How did that tear gas thing work?

JC: You had to go into this building and they filled it with tear gas and they made you take off your mask, plus there was always this one guy who was slow taking it off and you had to sit there until everyone took their mask off. I don't remember all the details but I knew it was going to burn the skin and I always knew it would burn my lungs.

Q: Do you remember your instructors?

JC: No.

Q: You got through boot camp ok, right?

JC: Yeah.

Q: Where did you go after that?

JC: I was sent to Biloxi, Mississippi. We actually went by bus, which was interesting, to Keesler Air Force Base where I would spend almost a year in electronics school. It was brand new at the time and it was taught by engineers from a firm of design.

Q: Your service was during the Cold War period, at the very beginning of Vietnam, correct?

JC: Correct.

Q: Where did you go after Keesler?

JC: There were only two bases that really had our planes, that I was trained to work on, in California and in Cape Cod. At the time my father was diagnosed with lung cancer and I wanted to be as close to home as possible so I asked for Cape Cod and they gave it to me.

Q: And the airplane you were flying was?

JC: The Constellation EC-121. It had a big radar on the belly. The ones we had were the latest and greatest, they were retrofitted with a tied in computer. Earlier versions of that plane had a whole bunch of radar consoles with guys verbally tracking with microphones. But it was all automated.

Q: What was your actual assignment?

JC: I actually was a repairman. I would power the radar up, get it all aligned, keep it running while we were up, it was not just the searching, we got a central gyro reference system that would stabilize the radar in relation to the plane. It was the first radar that could paint moving car indicators. In other words, they take the plane's altitude, azimuth, speed and everything and it would cancel out everything that wasn't moving in relation to us, so, we could follow the tracks. It was a vast improvement in the radar.

Q: So this was an early war system because, at the time, it was still - long and behold - a possibility that Soviets would try to attack us.

JC: Yeah, the idea was that if the Soviets were sending bombers, they would be sending them just at sea-level, maybe 100-feet up and we went out beyond the navy picket ships on both coasts and beam down over the curvature and we flew about 15,000-feet and we went out and beyond. I think we gave about 15 minutes extra warning or something like that. It would be coming in at sea-level and that was our focus. We had like 5 stations, up near Thule, Greenland and down south on the east coast.

Q: How long were you on this flight status?

JC: Well, just about the whole time I was in. You could work in the radar shop, some people did they didn't all fly, but, I think it was \$55 extra a month when you went on flight status and a lot more time off and in the summertime at Cape Cod at the beach, it was nice to have that time off. So, I overcame my fear of heights and became airborne.

Q: Now, how did you stay in touch with your family?

JC: Well, actually I could ride home every other weekend, it was just a money thing. It was like having a job where you would fly and you always got crew rest and that's an off day and sometimes fly crew rest often so you had a lot of time off. The flights typically

were 12-15 hours but occasionally a lot of equipment on there and old equipment fail and you'd have to come back in a couple hours for the flight.

Q: How was the food and so forth?

JC: It was adequate. I mean, the best part of it was the in-flight kitchen, you could go into the in-flight kitchen and get whatever you wanted breakfast, lunch, dinner, you know. It was nice.

Q: Did you feel any pressure or stress during these times?

JC: Well, being afraid of heights, the flying, but I did it.

Q: Was there anything that you would take for good luck, you know, that type of thing?

JC: Not that I remember.

Q: How did people entertain themselves?

JC: It was Cape Cod in the summer time. I remember a lot of college girls. It was a resort area and you'd drink.

Q: Where else did you travel besides Cape Cod?

JC: One winter I went to Kindley Air Force Base in Bermuda, because Cape Cod was famous for its fog we would stop there a lot. That was an alternative landing site for the planes.

Q: You mentioned that you saw an aircraft crashed at that site. Can you tell us about that?

JC: It was a weather plane, converted from a tanker into a weather plane, and it came in right alongside the ocean. There was a rock jetty, it wasn't anything dramatic. When the plane came in it was a four engine prop tier. It reversed the props and it took a 90 and fell right off the edge. Nobody was hurt or killed, but, the plane was damaged the most.

Q: You had mentioned that one of the pranks that they played on each other here had to do with the eye on input radar. Can you tell us about that?

JC: Part of our maintenance was the wave died on the radar. It was a 10 million watt radar, you know, for a short pulse. It was almost like the wave dial was circular and it was about 3 to 4 inches in diameter. It was like a huge coax with a solid copper core. One of the sergeants disconnected it and he wanted to see what would happen if we fired up the radar without the wave dial and we thought he was kidding. And he did bypass a few safety circuits and it came up I would say 30 percent power, which would be 3 million watt. Well, it sat right behind a guy working on the radios and his back was turned. He didn't know what was going on; and I realized the serge was going to pulse the radar. We had every reason in the world that it would be safe and he just decided to do it. I decided to run. I was going to try to get off at the back of the plane but he hit the button before I could. It sounded like two shotguns going off at the same time. The inside of the plane gave off a eerie, blue color, the radiation or whatever that came out of it. Even when I knew it was coming, the radio operator that didn't know it was coming, he flew off the plane. His eyes balled in terror on what happened. I didn't know how much radiation we were exposed to but I could only imagine. We used to wear these little bulbs so we could

tell if the radar was giving off an amount of radiation. Other than that, I don't really remember too many, people did things all the time, they would chase people around. There was always oil in that fiber glass radio room in the bottom and they would chase somebody in there and they would turn the antenna on and chase them around with the radar.

Q: You had mentioned you had a flight that nearly ended in tragedy. Can you tell us about that?

JC: I will never forget that. It was the middle of the night and I happen to be on duty so I was sitting in front of the console just watching, basically. We were over the North Atlantic. I don't know what station we were on. We used to fly and they wouldn't let us move off station, sometimes we were in thunderstorms, everybody would be getting sick and they'd make us stay there. But that night was no storm or anything. I was just sitting there and all of a sudden I felt this strange... it was a silence, basically. And I heard a click and the radar all went off and all the yellow lights came on and we basically lost all four engines. I found out that radar planes don't glide, which is called a negative fly ratio and you would fall at a 45 degree angle. We were at about 15,000 feet. We bottomed out about 3,000 feet when we got the engines started up again. Sheer terror I was underneath the plane, clawing my way up. You know, we were supposed to put on these survival suits, turn our chairs around and get into crash position. And I just all the time knew that we were going to die. Just terror, sheer terror trying to get in that seat and I couldn't and frankly after they got the engines restarted, I don't know what altitude we restarted but I knew we bottomed out at 3,000 feet. The G's we were pulling at I couldn't get up and get in the seat. You're young and scared and I just knew we were going to be in that ocean. Somehow they got them restarted. The flight engineer was strapped in and he threw all the fuel sources on. And you never forget something like that. In fact I never flew in the Air Force after that.

Q: You told me you flew home after that from the engine started in silence.

JC: Yeah, it was the weirdest thing. I think everyone was lost in their own cost. The captain said that we were going back. They didn't know what happened but the flight engineer knew he had just switched fuel tanks slightly before. The investigation showed that this was a navy retrofitted plane. It was taken from the navy and was retrofitted for the specs, the radar that the Air Force used, and they miss-wired the gauges with the fuel tank switches. They used to run the tip tanks, then the wing tanks, then the belly tanks. We ran 115, 145, 3, the types of gas. Pretty volatile stuff. And they kind of balanced it out going in and when he switched he switched the fuel tanks. We ran out of fuel, basically. All at once. The converters quit and we had no electric. That was the battery back-up that turned the yellow lights on.

Q: Not that you were able to ditch anyway, but the Atlantic told me that they found out that they weren't really good to ditch out anyway.

JC: Yeah, the navy versions didn't have the belly of the radar, they used to ditch everything the pilots were training and used them for (mumbles) practice. Logic said that with our planes, the first time we skipped we took the antenna radar right off and it would settle in like a normal (mumbles). A couple years or a year after I got out they tried to ditch a couple of them that were not going to make it back and off the

(mumbles) off of Nantucket and Martha's Vineyard, they lost everybody on board, both planes. The planes just came apart. Once they realized they didn't carry 'chutes they had nowhere to get off. They were kind of at the end of their life span anyway and they just grounded the fleet two years after me.

Q: What did you do after the Air Force?

JC: I went back to school for a while, went back to college. I got this great job offer at IBM and spent the next 30 years, I had to do electronics training basically to further my career at IBM.

Q: Did you form any friendships while you were in the service, did you stay in touch with other people?

JC: Yeah, a couple of guys that we were close. Matt Kenslow, I still do Christmas cards and stuff. My roommate Jang he lives down south from here that I kept in contact for years.

Q: Would you like to tell us anything you felt that your military experience has affected your life in general and what your attitude is towards the military and anything like that?

JC: I think the single thing that stands out the most is the near death experience, you know. It changed my view of life in general and how quick it can end, just live life to the fullest. I never really thought about it until that happened. It wasn't part of my thinking process, I guess. In general, the learning, the discipline, it was good for me. I really needed that. I wasn't exactly a saint in school but I was one of these kids that was blessed with the intellect.