

**James "Butch" Wesley Langhorn  
Veteran**

**Wayne Clarke  
Mike Russert  
New York State Military Museum  
Interviewers**

**Interviewed at  
Center Moriches (NY) Public Library  
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**Q:** Could you give me your full name and date of birth please?

**JWL:** My name is James Wesley Langhorn. My nickname is Butch, which is what I use mostly. My date of birth is April 8, 1945 and I was born in Southampton, Long Island, New York.

**Q:** Prior to entering military service, what was your educational background?

**JWL:** I was a high school graduate.

**Q:** Did you enlist or were you drafted?

**JWL:** I enlisted soon after high school in March of 1964.

**Q:** You enlisted in the Army, why did you select the Army?

**JWL:** To be perfectly honest with you, I don't know why I selected the Army. I happened to move into Queens where my Dad living, getting off of Long Island. I stayed with him about six months and really wasn't happy about that situation. I was walking down Jamaica Avenue and happened to walk past the Army Recruiting Office. I said let me just check and see what is going on with the Army. Four days later I was at Whitehall Street taking the physical and written tests. A week later I was in Fort Dix, New Jersey. The rest is history. Not much thought process took place. [Laughs]

**Q:** Did you ever think you would end up in Vietnam?

**JWL:** No, at the time I never thought about Vietnam. It did not dawn on me then.

**Q:** Where did you go for your Basic Training and how long were you there?

**JWL:** Fort Dix, New Jersey. I stayed there for eight weeks of Basic Training and then I was supposed to go through missile training. I was waiting for a school for that and stayed another six to eight weeks afterward I was shipped to Loring Air Force Base in Maine for training as a missile man. I was there about three weeks waiting for the course to start when I happened to see the \_\_\_\_\_ Choir, (@3:12 unclear) which was the Army Choir. They were performing there and were looking for people who were interested in singing. I happen to have a voice and I was sick of waiting for something to happen. I said "hey, this sounds interesting". I had an interview and a tape rehearsal and became a member of the \_\_\_\_\_ Choir (@3:47 unclear) which was the Army's choir. We traveled around singing at different Army bases. I did that for about a year, not even going to the missile school. I worked in Personnel, I studied to be a clerk typist. That was my MOS (Military Operational Specialty). That is what they OJT (On-the-job Training) me more or less in that career field, while at the same time I was in the

Special Services arena. I stuck with that for about a year then had an opportunity to come back to Fort Totten, which was a small station on the island. I thought maybe I would want to get close to home again because my mother had gotten sick at that time. So I decided to come back to Long Island and spent about a year at Fort Totten and that is where I got my hello orders to Vietnam.

That was the chain I went through prior to getting assigned to Vietnam. I spent thirteen months there. We landed in Tent City Eight, Saigon in 1965, I think. Then I went to Vung Tau, which is where I was assigned for about six months then they switched me back to Saigon for the remainder of the six or seven months so I was there for over thirteen months. The remainder of my time I worked out of Tan Son Nhut Air Force Base in Saigon.

**Q:** Were you with MACV (Military Assistance Command, Vietnam)?

**JWL:** Yes and basically, like I said, I did Personnel work for the Army at that time. We were located right by the staging area for the bodies to come in and that was one of the most traumatic things that I saw during Vietnam. I wasn't in combat. Back then it was early, Vung Tau was like the R&R (rest and recuperation) center for both sides. You could be on the beach and not know who was Vietnamese and who was the Viet Cong. When I got to Saigon, they were bombing around Saigon but Tan Son Nhut got hit two days before I was to leave. That was the first time Tan Son Nhut had gotten hit. The outer perimeters had gotten hit which shook me up a little bit. I had spent thirteen months here, I'm ready to go and now we get hit, you know? It was an experience. I'm as normal as I was before I went there so I thank God for that. But I was a scared young man when I was there. Just like anything else you know your surroundings and know what you can deal with and what you can't deal with. You have to make the best of it and that is basically what I did.

**Q:** Where you able to get into downtown Saigon?

**JWL:** When I was there, I explain it to be just like being in New York City. As a matter of fact, I did not like Vung Tau that much, but Saigon I had always said I would like to go back once everything had ended just to find out what it was like because I think it was a beautiful city. The French architect on Tu Do Street was just like New York City. The bars were beautiful, and at that age, that is where we hung out when we weren't working. We were downtown messing with the young ladies in the bars. I was amazed at the French influenced architect they had in Saigon. They were as nice, if not nicer than the ones in Manhattan you might say so that sort of impressed me.

Another thing that I found very funny that stays in my head is that I happened to date a Vietnamese woman early when I got to Saigon and we did not have curfew most of the time. Saigon was an area where you could pretty much come and go as you pleased. After a couple of weeks she had invited me to her home to have a meal. I got there and her mother started jibber-jabbering, I could not speak a lick of Vietnamese. She was making hand gestures like this (James places his hands over his face and rubs hands together). So I began to get alarmed and asked her daughter "Tan (@10:00 spelling) what is going on, what is your mother trying to say?" She could speak very good English. She said "my mother wants you to go take a bath and come back and we will eat". I said that sounds good to me and I went and took a Vietnamese bath-you sit in the tub and wash up- dressed and came back out and she went at it again. I wondered, "God, what is this woman talking about?" and asked Tan (@10:26 spelling) what was going on? She was laughing and said "she thought I was white and that I was still dirty!" [Everyone laughs] That story stays with me and tells you early it was that I was there.

Even though I was not actually in combat, I put all of that to the back of my mind because one of the major things we did in between pecking on the typewriters was counting the caskets as they came through on the flatbeds. That is something I recall like it was yesterday. It bothered me then and it bothers me today. It has always bothered me about the war and the military, it is something inevitable.

That is why I don't particularly care for what is going on with Mr. Bush today because we do not need to be there as far as I am concerned. I felt that way about Vietnam because when I did come home, like many soldiers the first thing I got was "who do you think you are?" I did not get spit in the face, but I got spit onto wearing my uniform.

**Q:** So as early as you came back, in 1966, that was the response?

**JWL:** Oh yeah. I could not understand why we were there. As a matter of fact, the Vietnamese used to say "Go home G.I. (government issue), we don't need you over here." I spent thirteen months there but often wondered why we were there. Why our soldiers had to get killed the way they did and what was it for. Today I still wonder you know why we were there other than the fact that we were told to go. We did what we were told to do.

**Q:** At the time you were there, you found you had fairly good relationships with the people of the country?

**JWL:** Oh yes.

**Q:** How about race relationships within the Army itself?

**JWL:** I did not find much of a problem with the differences in race. I don't know if I was fortunate, because certainly it was around, but I was from an area where people were people first. Being in Riverhead, Long Island which was multi-cultural back then, I handled it. Because I didn't see it, I knew when it was out and I just left it alone. I have always felt that my dollar was as good as your dollar; I put my pants on the same way that you put your pants on. If you don't want me, just let me know; and I'll make the decision as to whether I want to move somewhere else or stay and argue about it. In most cases I was able to stay, in some cases I moved out for fear of having a problem. But I didn't have much of a problem, so in answer to your question, I had a great military career.

**Q:** Even though you have some ambivalent feelings about if you should have been there or not, have you ever read anything or watched any of the movies made about the war?

**JWL:** No, I stay away from that. I don't go to see any war movies. I did not like them before I went into the service and don't like them now. I refuse to read anything about it as well.

**Q:** So when you got back home in 1966 you did see some anti-war things. How did you feel about the anti-war movement?

**JWL:** Again, I had my own personal feelings but I guess I kept them to myself and stayed away from that group and moved on with the rest of my life. When I left the Army, I got out of the military, came back home and opened up my own clothing store business for about two years. I damn near lost my shirt doing it. That was in the '70s when money wasn't that great. Being the only black owner of a business in Riverhead wasn't the greatest thing either. There was a reason I did it, partly because I wanted to make a statement. That is the type of guy I have always been. I don't regret having done it, I certainly learned a lot, but I also learned I did not want to be in the retail business after two years. [laughs]

There was a Reserve Base up in Westhampton, New York. The International Guard, actually it

was an old Air Force base that had closed down in 1970 and the Reserves came out in 1971. One of the gentlemen that had an account in my store was the Air Force Adviser out there. After I told him I was selling the store he said "Well, Butch what are you going to do?" I said I would find a job. He said "why don't you come out to the base, have you ever been in the military?" I said yes, I spent some time in the Army. He said there is an International Guard base. I said what the devil is an International Guard base? I knew about the Army National Guard, but I had heard of the International Guard. He said it is the same thing as the Army National Guard, but it is a component of the Air Force. So I said, I don't want to go back into the military, but said this is a reserve type of duty. One weekend a month and they have full-time state positions out there where you can work.

I said, it sounds like a good idea and went out there. It ended up that they hired me in Personnel as a GF-5 (@17:18 confirm rank), and I said this is good enough until I find something better. The rest is history, I went back on active duty with them in 1973. I went to recruiting school which was an active duty position. I stayed in recruiting pretty much nineteen years until I moved back into the Personnel arena and took over the Personnel Adviser for the base. I stayed there until 1999 when I retired off of active duty.

**Q:** So you retired with a total of about thirty-four years?

**JWL:** I retired with twenty-eight active years. Thirty-four total years.

**Q:** After you left, did you join any veteran's organizations?

**JWL:** I belong to the VFW (Veterans of Foreign Wars). I'm very active with them. That's one of the reasons how I ended up getting back into the Veterans on their side of the house. I was on active duty as the Director of Personnel. A lot of the work dealt with Veterans and their dependents. So when I retired Mike Forbes, who was the Congressman in 1998, called me up because I knew him for years. He was a local guy and said "Butch, I need someone to handle my Veterans Affairs". So I did. I knew the ins and outs of ARPC (Air Reserve Personnel Center), the National Personnel Records Center, the Archives, it made my job as an aide dealing Veterans Affairs fairly simple when it came to that stuff. Because I knew that background, it was really successful working with Mike Forbes to get some old, lingering Veterans' claims cleared up and finalized. So I got a good reputation, and when Tim Bishop became the Congressman, he called me up and said "Hey Butch, how about coming back to work for me?" Again, I liked my job so I said I'll do that. I'm also the Democratic Chairman for Riverhead so it keeps me in the loop of what is going on, you know for what I like to dabble with in politics – it all fits.

**Q:** Have you ever stayed in contact with anyone from the service?

**JWL:** No, not really. There is one fellow I had tried to look up from Basic Training. You asked me a question about race relations, this was a white gentleman from Wolf Creek, Tennessee. It was probably one of the only incidents that I can remember having a racial incident. It was in Basic Training, I had come in about ten o'clock at night. I don't remember where I had been, but everybody was in their bunk and I was making a little bit of noise. He said "why don't you shut the f---- up you nigger". I just went over and knocked him down a flight of steps. To make a long story short, at the end of the eight weeks of Basic Training, he came home with me and shared my home for the next ten days. He then moved on to his MOS (Military Occupation Specialties) training and I went on to Fort Dix. I lost track of him, I've always wanted to get in contact with him. His name was Jerry Helms (@22:27 spelling). I've tried searching computer sites. One of these days, if I get some time and I little extra money I think I'm going to go to

Wolf Creek, Tennessee because there can't be that many people so I should be able to track him down. So to answer your question, he's the only one that I've really wanted to see and haven't been able to look him up. So hopefully before I stop breathing I will have been able to find out something about him.

**Q:** How do you think your time in the service has affected your life?

**JWL:** I know it made me a man because when I left I was a young nineteen years old. I had never been away from home. It has pretty much given me the philosophy that I believe in. I believe in fairness, I was treated fairly. I made it to the top without having to kiss anybody's butt. I struggled to get to the top but I did get there. I know how to look behind me to see from whence I came, so that I appreciate and I got that from Uncle Sam. So I owe a lot to the military.

I respect it to the most so much that when my son told me "Dad I don't want to go into the military" I said son, if you don't want to, don't go because I don't want you to ruin my reputation! [laughs] You don't have to go, there are other ways to make it in the world. My daughter often talked about going in, and I used to cringe but I would never say no to her. I told her, Kelly, you need to do what you need to do. But you need to go to school first. Fortunately, she got a teaching degree and soon after that got married so there went the military thought. I was glad of that, but I never told her no if she wanted to make that commitment. I loved the military. I owe everything I have to the military and my mother.

**Q:** Thank you very much for your interview.

**JWL:** Okay, thank you.