

Brian Sliwa

Born:

Died:

Period of Service:

Sources:

VETERANS HISTORY PROJECT
Preserving Stories of Service for Future Generations

Interview with

Brian Sliwa

Conducted by John Gay

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request of the veteran.**

This is John Gay talking with Brian Sliwa on Washington Island at his home on Detroit Harbor Road – a pretty home with a pretty yard; bright day on September 14, 2015. So Bryan, if you would tell us about where you got started in the military, what you were doing beforehand and some of your experiences in the military.

Life Before Entering Military Service

Well, I was born in Milwaukee and was raised there until I was 8. Then I moved up to Upper Michigan – Iron Mountain, and later Kingsford, Michigan. By the time I got out of high school I knew I was not ready to go on to college. I knew that just wasn't for me. I had always been in love with the sky and airplanes, and I wanted to fly but knew I couldn't without a college education at that time. So, I joined the Army and put in for jump school – for parachute school. My parents were heartbroken. They were disappointed. They wanted me to go to college, but I made up for it later.

Basic and Advanced Training

So at the age of 19 I went into the Army. I went through basic training at Fort Leonard-Wood, Missouri, then went through advanced training [also] at Fort Leonard-Wood, Missouri ...to be a combat engineer.

What year was that?

I graduated in 1962 in June, and I went into the Army in September of 1962, and advanced training at Fort Leonard-Wood and got out just before Christmas. Then, as I remember, coming back from Christmas leave going to jump school.

While I was in jump school at Fort Benning, this guy with a funny flat green hat came around and said they were looking for volunteers for Special Forces. It sounded pretty interesting, so I showed up for the test. It was a stress written test – it was all timed. They asked you a lot of interesting questions, like 'what would you do in this situation or that situation?' What they were looking for was how quickly you could think. I remember [in] a lot of the situations, they would not give you a good answer – they wouldn't do it. One, in particular, was that you were a policeman and were called to a house where someone had been taken hostage. You pulled up in front and there they gave you the choice of getting out the other side of your car and firing some quick shots and charging the house with the last three shots. And that was the best. The other choices were talking to the guy who was shooting at you. They wanted to see what you could do with almost nothing. It was a fascinating test. I took it. I think there were 16 of us who took the test. I'm not bragging, but I was one of only two who were accepted. I was told the next day I'd be going to Fort Bragg for Special Forces training.

Did you know what that was at that time?

They generally explained that special forces ... [were being called up] – no, we weren't called Green Berets at that time. It was Special Forces, and it was behind-the-lines training of

resistance people and ... [organizing] resistance from behind the lines, and also reconnaissance work behind the lines and that sort of thing.

So I went to Fort Bragg. They were kind of backed up at that point because they were really expanding Special Forces. So I spent a lot of time pulling KP and that sort of thing.

That was when Vietnam was just cooking.

That was just starting. This would be 1963.

So I got my ... [green beret] and became a demolitions man in Special Forces. Then I put in for the medical training, which was quite advanced. I went to Fort Sam in Houston for Special Forces medical training.

... I was there.

Oh, that was fascinating. That was just fascinating – Fort Sam being the medical center of the US Army and the burn center of the US government. So I went through there and went back to Fort Bragg.

Duty Assignments

You're already into 1963?

This would be 1964, and edging toward 1965. I was in the Fifth Special Forces group. They were alerted to go to Vietnam. Well, I'd be in Vietnam at least a year, and I would have had to extend my three-year enlistment to do that. I didn't want to do it. At that point I wanted to get out of the Army and go to college. So I turned that down; I said I wouldn't extend.

So [with] that and with a few other discipline problems I left Special Forces. They sent me to the 82nd Airborne Division. I went to the 325th ... [airborne] infantry regiment and I was a medic with Headquarters Company. Basically all I had to do was keep my boots shined and my belt buckle polished, keep my nose clean and I'd be getting out two months early to go to college.

Well, I came back from doing my laundry at a buddy's house one Sunday night in May – May 4, 1965, and all the lights are on in the Division ... [area]. There were trucks going everywhere. I realized, oh, oh – something's up. So I go up into the barracks and guys are packing – they're throwing stuff in duffle bags and foot lockers. I asked what was going on. Somebody said, "The Dominicans are shooting each other and we've got to go down there and stop it." I said, "The nuns are shooting each other?" And my friend, Jose Cruz, who was from Puerto Rico said, "No, come here. There's an island – the Dominica ... – with two countries, Haiti and the Dominican Republic. There's a revolution going on down there and they don't know if the Cubans are involved or not. And we've got to go down and get a sort of handle on it."

Well, what had happened was exactly that. The Dominican Republic had been a dictatorship for a long time – first under Trujillo, who was assassinated by the real jackal, not the one who called himself 'The Jackal' later. And then the Army took over with the police and ran a replacement dictatorship. The people – the middle class [and] the working class – had gotten

sick of it. So it was shopkeepers, garbage collectors and construction guys and all kinds of people in the capitol alone – this did not go out into the country – who were trying to put an end to the dictatorship. The CIA station chief had retired the first of the year, and nobody could tell President Johnson if the Cubans were involved or not. It turns out they weren't. It turns out they were one of the last groups to find out about it, because these people did not want the Cuban Communist Party taking over their revolution.

So what had happened was that the revolutionaries had all gone downtown in Santo Domingo, the capitol, and the police and military and the cab drivers who operated as a mafia in Santo Domingo, had all gone uptown and were shooting at each other.

So we went in. We landed at San Isidro Air Base. It wasn't a parachute drop; it was an air landing. We brought in C130 after C130 of equipment and people in San Isidro, which was east of the capitol. And the Navy landed a Marine fleet unit – a large unit of Marines – to the west of the capitol at the Naval Academy. And at a given ... [signal] we closed in from both sides.

That day I was pulling guard duty from about 10:00 to about 2:00 in the morning.

So you were down there with them.

Oh, yeah. I got sent down. We were one of the first groups to go down. I remember sitting on top of an ambulance on guard duty – watching our stuff out in this field at the Air Base. And every 30 seconds a C130 would take off, and every 30 seconds a C130 would land. Every once in a while another type of aircraft would land. But that went on, John, for hour after hour after hour. It was amazing! I really got a feel for the United States extending its power overseas, or around the world. We are an incredibly powerful country, and we had our act together to extend it where we needed.

So the next Sunday evening, I forget the date, we started at Midnight – we trucked in and got out. We went over a bridge – the Duarte Bridge. The 508th Infantry had taken it earlier that day, and they lost eight paratroopers taking it because you could only take it from one side; you couldn't get troops on both sides.

We went over that bridge and then started through no-man's land. And we received not much in the way of resistance – a few shots from a couple of snipers – but not much. We took a road that led from east to west into the main part of Santo Domingo, north of downtown. And the Marines took a road that led from west to east. We met up north of downtown and had established this two-block international free zone. It was turned over to the Organization of American States in the next couple of days. But we took the buildings on either side and went up to the top. And we could control that street and the buildings adjacent.

At first we got some sniper fire, but they quickly learned. What a lot of people learned very quickly was the United States troops, soldiers and Marines, generally can hit what they can see – they're very good shots. We do wonderful basic training and small arms training. And Americans are darn good shots with those weapons.

So the sniper fire settled down. We had about two weeks of it; not many casualties. The Army learned not to shoot at the rebels because we would return fire thinking they were shooting at us. So the whole thing calmed down. It was turned over to the Organization of American States. The upshot was after about four or five months they established a democracy in the Dominican Republic. It wasn't a 100% successful, and at election time in the Dominican

Republic there was still some shooting. But the people weren't controlled the way it used to be under the dictatorship. The people had some say. I felt very proud of that.

And I also felt very proud that, as a medic, I never fired my 45. I never had to do that. I had another friend who did that. He did have to open up his 45 and took out a sniper. But I didn't have to do that. I did have my 45 out of a couple of times when I was a little worried, a little scared at night. But I never had to use it. Except for one time when it got put to use in a very questionable way.

I had met this young lady who spoke some English. And the young ladies liked talking to the paratroopers and the Marines. And I got permission to go to her house when her parents weren't home and take a shower. We didn't have a lot of running water down there – the people did, but the troops didn't where we were staying. So I brought a clean uniform – she told me where the key was – and I went in and took a shower at lunchtime. I took the 45 out and put it close by the shower where I could reach it. I was lathering up and I heard something. It sort of sounded like a door. I wasn't sure. So I reached out and picked up the 45. I didn't take it into the shower because I didn't want to get it wet; I just held it there. And I didn't hear anything for a while, so I finished washing and put my uniform on.

She came running up to me that night and said, "What did you do to my brother? You frightened my brother and he doesn't want to come home." She didn't call me an SOB, but she wanted to. I asked what happened. She said, "He came home and you were holding a gun!" I said I was in the shower and was just holding the gun. She would never talk to me again after that. And I was never able to take [another] shower after that.

From Army to Air Force

Anyway, I didn't get my early-out to go to college; I had to stay in the whole time. And I got out in September of 1965 and went to college – first Western Michigan University and then at Northern Michigan University in Marquette, Michigan.

I have a girlfriend who taught at Western Michigan in Kalamazoo.

That's a nice place.

I met a young lady. We fell in love, got married and had a baby. In three years I graduated with a BS in geography and a minor in political science, with a 3.8 grade point average. I surprised myself a couple of years ago. I took my papers and I had a 3.8 – I didn't realize I had done that well!

Well, it was graduation time and I had to decide what I wanted to be when I grew up. I had a wife and a little girl [after all]. But I still wanted to fly – I still loved aircraft. I found out that even with my eyesight, which was not 20-20, I could go into the Air Force and I could fly as a navigator. I could get paid for the three years I was in the Army and the three years I was in the inactive Reserves. So I did that. I joined the Air Force and got commissioned a second lieutenant over six for pay. And I earned about as much money as anybody I graduated with earned, at least that first year. Most of them [have] caught up and surpassed me since.

I became a navigator and went to Nav School at Mather Air Force Base in Sacramento – another beautiful place.

Sacramento, California?

Yes. It's the capitol. It's one of the nicest places they ever sent me. The summers are very hot, but otherwise it's wonderful.

I became a back-seater in the F4 Phantom, and was sent to Holloman Air Force Base, with a unit called the 417th Tactical Fighter Squadron.

Where's Holloman?

Holloman is in Alamogordo, New Mexico – south-central New Mexico. It's a beautiful area. It's a high elevation area, so the summers aren't terribly hot. We bought a house in Alamogordo and I lived there with my wife and little girl.

The 417th was an interesting squadron. It didn't have a lot of adult supervision. By that I mean, the Air Force decided to expand all flying wings – at least all fighter wings – to four squadrons rather than three. So this 417th had been a floater, first in USAFE – Ramstein Air Force Base in Germany, then Hahn Air Force Base in Germany, then over to Mountain Home Air Force Base with another wing, and finally got tied up with the 49th Tactical Fighter Wing at Holloman. So the 49th was made up of the 7th – the 'Bunyaps' ... what they called themselves after a New Guinea god; the 8th, the 'Black Sheep'; and the 9th, the 'Iron Knights' tactical fighter squadrons; along with the 417th tactical fighter squadron. We weren't even on the same part of the base as the wing. We got put over on the other side of the base. And, like I said, we didn't have a lot of adult supervision.

It was one of the best units I'd ever been with. Morale was really high, and the ability to fly and hit targets and navigate correctly at night was very high. These guys were very good. We would go to exercises, and the 417th always ranked very high in exercises. We were good. We knew what we were doing and we prided ourselves on that.

So I flew backseat for two-and-a-half years and enjoyed it. But I wanted to pull on the ... [pole] and push on the pedals. I wanted to be a pilot. And because I was already a navigator, I could get an eyesight waiver and upgrade to pilot after I'd been a navigator for a while.

So I put in for helicopter school thinking I'd get a rotary wing qualification.

And you went back to San Antonio?

Well, yes, for a while.

There was a helicopter pad right outside my barracks!

I was at Randolph Air Force Base first, then to Fort Walters, Texas with the Army, because the Army was training all ... [Air Force] helicopter pilots. At any rate, my plan was ... [to] get rotary wing rated, and then after five years I'd put in to get upgraded to fixed wing.

Well, my plans were short-circuited by rheumatoid arthritis, but I'll get into that later.

But I got sent to Randolph first, just for processing. And then the Army trained all Air Force helicopter pilots first at Fort Walters in Texas. And when you got done and ... [got] your wings from Fort ... [Rucker, Alabama], you'd go to Hill Air Force Base where they'd train you to fly the 'right way.' That was the joke. But you'd get trained on the particular helicopter you were flying, which, in my case, was the Huey. So there I was at Fort Walters and getting TDY

pay. I brought my wife down and we got into a duplex, with our little girl, named [Susanne] I was getting TDY pay because the Air Force wasn't supplying anything. It was something like \$18 and something a day. That comes in later. About three or four weeks after I left for helicopter school the 49th that was dedicated to USAFE in Europe was alerted that that was all over. The big push in Vietnam was on – Linebacker 1 or 2, I'm not sure which – and they were going to Takhli in Thailand.

They called me and asked if I could get back there because they were short of back-seaters. So I tried everything I could think of, and Air Training Command would not let me go. They said I was an Air Training Command asset.

So there I was with my wife and little girl in the little town of Fort Walters, living in a nice duplex, getting \$18 and something a day. And my buddies in the 417th were living out of tents at Takhli, brushing their teeth in beer because there was no fresh water. Because their housing and food was provided for, they were only getting \$2 and something a day! I didn't tell anybody that for years – not for years!

So I got checked out on helicopters, and the first place I went was to Las Vegas – Nellis Air Force Base. You'd think that would be a really good assignment. Nellis Air Force Base was the dullest place the Air Force ever sent me. It was right there in Las Vegas, and unless you gambled, which I didn't do much of or went to shows, there wasn't that much to do. It's changed. There's a lot more culture in Las Vegas now. My daughter is an attorney now for the State of Nevada and lives in Las Vegas, and there's a lot to do. It's a much better place.

But for the four years I was there I flew range support, which was a little bit of everything.

What years were they?

I left the 417th in 1972, and I went through helicopter school, and in the spring of 1974 is when I think I got to Las Vegas and Nellis Air Force Base. ... [I was in the 57th tactical fighter wing]. At any rate, I served with the wing and ... we did a lot of [interesting] work. I was transferred from the ... [57th] up to Indian Springs, which is north of Las Vegas by about sixty miles. It's the base that supports the major gunnery range up there and also Area 51. I never saw much at Area 51 and never did much there. I flew things in and took things out – mostly people and parts. But we did support Area 51. I stayed there and flew Huey's there – and later on twin-engine Huey's, the 1N model, until 1977. I came down with rheumatoid arthritis. I was 33 at the time. It got bad enough that it knocked me out of the cockpit.

So, I put in for and was sent to intelligence school to be a teacher, an air intelligence officer, and teach air crew about the threat.

Where was that?

That was in Denver ... [Lowrey AFB]

You didn't have to go back to Washington.

No. I was sent right from Nellis to the intelligence school at Lowry Air Force Base in Denver. I mean, "in" Denver. They had closed the runways because it was in Denver, and they

were putting buildings on the runways and everything else. Lowry was not a flying base at that time, but it was the intelligence training center for the Air Force.

I got there in 1977, and I believe it was about a nine month course and I graduated in 1978 as an Air Intelligence Officer.

What did you have to learn?

Well, how to teach and keep an air crew's attention for one thing. One of the things I learned is that you never ask, 'are there any questions', because you'd get 'why is there air?' and 'why am I here?' and that sort of thing. Basically it was learning teaching techniques, Soviet and Chinese military capabilities and equipment – what they would be flying against. And then you'd specialize once you got to a unit and what they were tasked to fly against.

I got sent to the First Special Operations Wing at Hurlbert ... Field in Florida. They were sort of the black-ops unit of the Air Force, although they really weren't black-ops. ... [They're] performed black-ops, but they were sort of out in the open – they weren't a secret unit. They were an adjunct of Eglin Air Force Base in Fort Walton Beach. It was over on the other side of Fort Walton Beach. It was a very interesting unit. They flew gun ship C130's – C130's that had 40mm guns ... and [a] 105mm Howitzer firing out of one side, as well as Gatling guns. They also had behind-the-line helicopter units flying – again, Huey's – 1N model Huey's – and their specialty was infiltrating people and ex-filtrating people – getting [them in] behind the lines and getting them out from behind the lines.

And they flew another C130 unit ... [who's aircraft were] painted black and green. They would go almost any place in the world and do all sorts of interesting things that I never even found out about as an intelligence officer. They would come back. There was never any gossip. These people's security awareness was excellent. You never heard stories. You never heard gossip. Your neighbor would disappear for six weeks and come back. You'd ask "How did it go." They'd say, "Went good." "You get sick over there?" "No." "Where did you go?" "Oh, Bryan, you know better than that!" And like that. The security was excellent.

I never did find out what some of these people did until the hostage rescue attempt. That was in ... 1979-1980.

In Iran?

Yes, in Iran. The Iranians took 93 people hostage.

And there were there for 444 days.

Yes, 444 days. We were part of that hostage rescue attempt. We deployed to an old closed down Russian air base in Egypt. We opened it back up. The Egyptians helped. They provided guards and refurbished the runway ... [very] quickly. We were flying aircraft – the C130's again – out of there. And then they were flying out of one of the Arab Emirates as well. As you know, it failed.

That was Carter?

That was President Carter who sent them in. One of the failings was weather. We don't fail that way anymore because we have an Air Force weather unit that goes behind the lines and forecasts weather. But they ran into what was called a haboob – a massive sandstorm, and they didn't know what it was. And that basically grounded the aircraft. And when they tried to fly out after refueling, a helicopter taxied into a C130 and there was an explosion. I lost eight friends in the C130. We quickly packed up everything and pulled back out.

Didn't the dust hurt the engines? Wasn't there a problem with that?

There were problems with the engines, but they were going to press on anyway. Except that helicopter after helicopter had engines quit and turn back. So when they got to the refueling point they did not have the number of helicopters they needed – the minimum to pull this off. And that's when they decided to pull back. And that's when the accident happened.

It was a shame. It was a bad day. ...

Were you on the plane?

No. I stayed in Egypt. One of my friends – a couple of the guys who worked with me – deployed forward to the Arab Emirates, but they weren't on the mission. They were intelligence guys.

I did okay until we got back. My wife picked me up and she was driving out the gate, and I saw the flag at the gate flying [at] half-mast. And that's when I lost it. That was hard.

Meanwhile, back in the desert, prior to the failure, we had made up these map packets for people in case the aircraft went down. They could take these and escape and evade out. If you were close to Tehran you wanted to contact the Kurdish people in the mountains to the west of there. So we had one packet labeled Tehran – just a plastic packet with maps in it with black magic marker – TEHRAN – on that packet. And if you didn't make it to Tehran, if you went someplace short, there were other ways to go to the coast. We had two packets for that because it was a longer leg – Desert 1 and Desert 2 – were written on the packets. That was if you got to this point you'd go ahead with packet 'Desert 2'. If you hadn't got to that point you'd go to packet 1 – just to grab the right packet to have maps to be able to walk out of there.

One of the packets marked 'Desert 1' was found at the crash site. The refueling point was never called Desert 1. That's something I can't remember if [it was] me or somebody else [who] came up with – what to call the packets. Somebody said why don't we call the one Tehran, but what about the other two – mountain and desert? But it was decided on 'Desert 1' and 'Desert 2'. And that's how it got to be called Desert 1. That was the map packet they found in the wreckage, [not the refueling site].

I loved the job there. Every once-in-a-while we'd meet up with some interesting people, like some SAS officers came over. They were a lot of fun. They did some exercises with our people. The stories they told were great. The stories [they] could tell were pretty good.

SAS is what?

The British delta force. They're a lot like us. And you had these exchanges all the time. People exchanged officers and NCO's. You learned so much from the way other people do things. You bring stuff back to your unit and put it into effect.

The arthritis was getting significantly better. I tried to get back to flying helicopters.

Were you taking some special medicine?

No, nothing special. I was taking stage 1 and stage 2 type medications – stuff to reduce the inflammation and a little more advanced stuff. But I did get a remission. It was going away.

I almost made it out of the intelligence community, but the son-of-a-gun at Randolph Air Force Base who was in charge of personnel – in charge of intelligence people – who was a major and I don't remember his name, saw me leaving. He grabbed me and sent me to Korea for a year without my family. Before I could get out I was assigned to Korea for a remote tour for a year. I wound up going north of Seoul, to a little place called Uijongbu, which is what the MASH series was written about. They were supposed to be stationed at Uijongbu. It was based on a MASH unit that was there during the Korean War. Well, Uijongbu was 15 miles from the DMZ, so you always knew where your gas mask was!

I was part of a unit, the 604 Direct Air Support Squadron. They provided forward air controllers with jeeps with radios in them to call in air strikes along with Army units. These guys were assigned both to American Army units – the 2nd Infantry Division – and Korean Army units. They would get an interpreter who spoke English ... A lot of the Korean people speak some English because they learn it in school. They have an excellent school system. At any rate, that's what we did. I was an intelligence officer with this Direct Air Support Squadron that provided forward air controllers for the Koreans in that part of Korea, and the 2nd Infantry Division in that part of Korea.

It was very interesting. I learned great respect for the Korean people. They were taking advantage of the fact that they now were living in a democracy, and even if you weren't from an important family if you worked hard you could move ahead. If you saw a soldier he either had on his helmet and his weapon – and they'd be carrying some equipment. Or if he had on a soft cap and wasn't on duty, he was carrying school books. Almost always if he had on a cap he was carrying school books. They were taking advantage of education as best they could. And the school kids, too. For the first time in their society you didn't have to stay on the social wrung that you were born into. You could work your way up.

Interesting.

They really were an interesting people. I really liked them. I had great respect for them.

Did you learn to like kimchi?

I did like kimchi. They would serve very mild kimchi to the Americans. But it was still good. Some of it was strong. And, of course, the guys from Texas and our Hispanic guys learned to enjoy kimchi.

What year was that?

That was July, 1981 into July, 1982.

Getting back to kimchi, there are about 5,000 families in South Korea, so there are about 5,000 kimchi recipes. Everybody makes it different. ...

You were given a chance to re-up along the way. Every four years was it?

No. The officers didn't really re-up. The only thing I was offered to do was to go from the Reserve Air Force, which I was in, to regular Air Force. And I did. I was a first lieutenant at the time, and I thought it was a pretty good move because I intended to stay in to retirement. So I became a regular Air Force officer, which put me in a different group for promotion and that sort of thing. But, no, you didn't re-up every four years; you were just in.

Every four years is for the enlisted men.

Right. So if you wanted to get out you could put in your papers to get out. Back in the 417th, when we were flying F4's, one guy walked in and sat down with the squadron commander – this was a very nice, quiet pilot and was known to be very savvy as far as investments go. He said to the squadron commanders, "Sir, my investments have just gone over two and a half million, I think I'm going to put in my papers to get out. I've been a pilot for seven years now, but I think I'm going to go into investments permanently." Everybody understood that. We threw him a big party.

At any rate, the camp at Uijongbu was called Camp Red Cloud. It was the headquarters for the [U.S.] Army and the Korean Army for that sector of Korea – for the western third of Korea. So there was a Korean three star general on the base, and an American three star general on the base. And, of course, they had the generals' mess with their staffs. Well, they allowed all the American officers to join that mess also, which was fine. The food was wonderful. It was just a courtesy because we often briefed the Korean officers on intelligence matters, and picked stuff up from them. They just kept ... [us] in with them, even though we weren't majors and above.

The reason I mention this, is one day a nice guy – a Captain Rodriguez – joins our unit. He was a fighter pilot and was going to be a forward air controller. Rodriguez was an Osage Indian. He came into the mess. We're sitting there eating. When one of the generals would walk in everybody would stand at attention. But before they could stand the general would yell, "At ease," or "Carry on, gentlemen." The Korean general would do that and the American general would do that. Rodriguez is sitting with us, and General Kim, the three-star, walks in and doesn't call "As you were." So everybody stands at attention.

Let me give you some background on General Kim, the three star general. I'm convinced this man was Irish at some point in his lineage. He was extremely bright, one of the most intelligent men you'll ever meet. He had a twinkle in his eye and this great sense of humor. And he didn't seem to be able to be rattled. He didn't take anything [too] seriously ... [as a] threat. He handled everything, which was why he was a three-star.

All of us standing at attention, he walks over to our table and says to our Lieutenant Colonel, "Colonel, I see you have a new officer here." Our lieutenant colonel, I can't remember the guy's name, was a wonderful guy. He said, "Yes, sir. May I introduce Captain Rodriguez? He's just joined us from the Air Force." So General Kim says, "Captain Rodriguez, where are you from?" He said, "I'm originally from Oklahoma, sir. But I'm here from ..." and he named his former squadron. General Kim said, "Thank you very much. I appreciate meeting you." And as he's walking away he says, "Carry on." So everybody sits down. We're all looking at each other. And the servers come over and say, "General Kim asked if you, Lieutenant Colonel,

and you, Captain Rodriguez, would join him at his table.” That was never seen before. So ... [the servers] pick up all their food and go over to sit down. And Kim is smiling and putting the guys at ease. And he turns and says something nice to our commander. Then he turns and says to Rodriguez, “I wanted to welcome you back to Korea.” Captain Rodriguez says, “Oh, but I’ve never been to Korea before.” Kim said, “Oh, but you have. Your people left us 20,000 years ago and traveled across the Aleutian [land] bridge and went to America. And you’re one of our descendants in America.

They all truly believe this. And when Rodriguez came back and told the story it hit me like a ton of bricks. We would go to the movies and if there was anything about Indians at all, the Koreans would all cheer for the Indians. There were a number of Westerns that were pretty good at the time. But as soon as the Indians would come on the set, they’d all sit up and watch. They identified with the American Indians because those people – and you know how big family is in the Far East – those people were part of their family who went to America. It was one of the things that opened my eyes to how people around the world think differently and hold different values.

That’s interesting.

So finally I left Korea – a little reluctantly, even though my family wasn’t there. I went back and went to Hill Air Force Base again and got checked out on Huey’s again. I was sent to George Air Force Base in southern California. It’s above San Bernardino in what’s called the High Desert. It’s beautiful territory. The summers aren’t that hot and the winters aren’t that cold. It’s called ... [the] ‘Champaign climate’ up there. It’s just beautiful.

George Air Force Base was a neat Air Force base. All the Air Force wild weasels that would go out after enemy radar and enemy missile sites ... [were] there. And there was a regular fighter bomber wing ... – the 35th Tac Fighter Wing. I was attached to the 35th ... I was put in charge of helicopter operations – Chopper Ops. There was myself, a captain, and five younger pilot’s right out of flight school. They would send the younger pilots there and they’d get a year or two helicopter experience, and then they would go on to more demanding helicopter work.

... We were called [a] ‘range support [unit]’. We would support the gunnery ranges to the north. They were too far really to drive to, so we would fly the range control officer and the range people up there and back. Helicopters are like Jeeps – they’re used for almost everything. We would fly parts and fly people one place or another.

I remember one morning we had the helicopter freshly painted and scrubbed up because we took one of the assistant secretaries of the Air Force up to the range to look ... [over] the range. And then we took that same helicopter that afternoon and went someplace, loaded it up with a bunch of dirty radio parts that had been out for a long time, and flew it back. The crew chief was angry, the chief of helicopter maintenance was angry. So we all chipped in and helped clean this beautiful helicopter out again.

But we did a little bit of everything – VIP work. I got two ‘saves’ from Hill Air Force Base. Hill Air Force Base runs Air Force Rescue, or did at that time and I think they still do. If you go pick up somebody injured or something like that, or help get rescue people into an area, you can get what’s called a ‘save.’ I wrote the stuff up – I didn’t want it for myself as I was nearing the end of my career, but I wanted it for my younger pilot. So we got two saves in the period I was there. I tried to show the younger guys – and we got a young girl right out of the

Air Force Academy ... [and] helicopter school – I tried to show them what I had learned as far as helicopters go: what to do and what not to do.

Were they reliable? I had heard they could be kind of tricky.

Helicopters aren't really tricky if you're trained on them. They're like a motorcycle or anything else. They can do very special things, but you have to be careful with them. You have to use your judgment. It's a little more physically demanding, flying a helicopter, because it's a little more of a balancing act. For instance, when you first get in, the way they wash people out is they give you ten hours to learn to hover. What hovering is doing, if you stop to think about it, is flying formation with the ground. Now, the ground doesn't move, but you've got to stay in one spot over the ground, or move around one spot. It's basically flying formation. Flying formation in fixed wing training isn't tackled until the end of the syllabus, when you're almost done. But they demand that coordination out of people right up front in helicopters. This doesn't make us any [better] pilots, or any tougher, but it is a demanding syllabus.

I managed to do it. I had 9 1/2 hours and I still wasn't hovering. And you weren't just practicing hovering, you were doing everything. You were learning navigation. You were learning approaches; all kinds of other stuff. And I was at 9 1/2 hours. I was ready to wash out and I was still wasn't able to hover. Hovering is kind of funny. You have to think in three dimensions – vertically, left and right, and forward and back. That sounds nice. But you don't have the mental ability to do that! The human brain can't do it. So until one of those dimensions – and it's usually the vertical one because it's the simplest – is taken over by that part of your brain that steers [the car] without you thinking about it, you can't hover.

You can drive down the street and have a phone call, and you steer just fine – you stay in the middle and everything – because that's almost the subconscious part of the brain that does the steering for you. ... [It] works through the eyes and gets the input of what's going on with how the road is and steers left or right without you thinking of it.

One of those dimensions has to be picked up at least for a fraction of a second so you can concentrate on the other two dimensions. Eventually that comes and it becomes second nature. I was determined. If I was going to flunk out of helicopter school [it would be] because I couldn't hover the Huey! I'm NOT going to [be] flunked out of helicopter school [by the helicopter]!

This was after Korea. This was way back when I was first learning to fly. So I determined I was going in that day and make the helicopter do what I wanted it to do. If it was wrong, I'd flunk out. But the helicopter wasn't going to flunk me out of flying school; I'm going to flunk out of flying school – [me]! So I got on the stick and I was determined. And I made the helicopter do it. By God, I hovered! And I hovered successfully – first for a couple of ... [seconds] and then for five minutes. And then I was hovering. I could do it! That way I wasn't washed out of helicopters.

When I went back to Hill Air Force Base after Korea I checked out on the Huey again. I'm telling you this for a reason. I scored an outstanding on my check flight. That's almost unheard of. In retraining they usually don't ... [give] people [an] outstanding. They'd give you a really good grade and send you back to your unit. But I got an outstanding.

I was sent on to George Air Force Base, like I said, and flew Huey's there with these five younger pilots. And the pilots rotated. They'd leave the unit and go on to something bigger and better, and we'd get a new guy right out of helicopter school and start teaching him. Then we had enlisted people, too and maintenance people. It was a good small unit – a lot of morale; a lot

of closeness; a lot of trust ... [in] each other. We did some really good work. We did some demanding work, too, and pulled it off well.

But that's basically where I retired from.

What year was that?

That was 1986 – September of 1986.

So you were in from ...

I was in from 1962 to 1965 – three years. Then I was in 17 years in the Air Force from 1969 to 1986. So I retired with 20 years. However, I was only a captain. How did that come about?

Well, along the way in college and in the Air Force I became an alcoholic. And for about 11 years I was a steadily drinking alcoholic. And some of my officer effectiveness ratings were not that good. So when I'd come up for promotion against other guys I wasn't able to be promoted. I finally got into AA through an Air Force program – they had an Air Force program. Up until that point they'd let guys get worse and worse, then kick them out of the Air Force. They realized that wasn't a good way to do it, and they were losing a lot of middle management, especially with NCO's, but they didn't know any other way to do it. People were urging them, and they finally accepted the idea that maybe they could get guys into AA and sober them up in the Air Force and not have to throw them out.

And use them.

And use them. And that's what they did with me. I was a very mediocre helicopter pilot when I got out of flying helicopters and got into intelligence. And it was at that point that I sobered up and got into AA.

So I went through intelligence and got into helicopters. And, like I said, I received an outstanding on my check flight. I was a good pilot! I didn't think I was. But it was the drinking. It was the alcoholic. And not just because of that, but because I did function as a good officer I did receive very good OER's from higher ranking officers that I worked for, the Air Force, instead of getting rid of me three years before my 20 years, which they were supposed to do because I was not promotable. If you're not promotable for captain at about 14 years, you were supposed to get out. But they extended me. They did that for three years, and I was able to retire as a captain.

It was up or out.

Exactly. But they extended me until I could retire with 20 years.

That was great.

The Air Force was like that. The Air Force was a 'people' service. There were only about 100,000 people in the Air Force. Where in the Army, at times, it would be half a million

or more. So we were always ... running into people that we flew with or worked with or went to school with – ... [that] I flew in the helicopter and scared or whatever.

So you got out at ...

At George Air Force Base.

Where is that again?

George Air Force Base is in southern California. It's above San Bernardino, up over the San Bernardino Mountains.

Where is Hill?

Hill Air Force Base is in Ogden, Utah.
So I got out.

Returning to Civilian Life

What did you do after you got out?

Well, I was going to go to Saudi Arabia and teach helicopter flying. I was going to do the same thing I did at George Air Force Base with the 35th, in chopper ops. I was going to teach people how to fly helicopters. But the arthritis got significantly worse. I finally wound up being declared 100% disabled by ... VA determination.

Since my retirement, the United States government has taken wonderful care of me. I get my retirement pay and my Social Security. And I got that early because I was disabled. And my VA disability pay. They've taken wonderful care of me since then.

Did you work after you got out of the service?

When the arthritis hit and I realized I wasn't going to fly, I joined a computer organization and started learning computers. But that didn't come too much, either. Basically I just retired and have enjoyed retirement ever since.

That's great. Well, Brian thanks for sitting down with us and talking about your experiences.

It was fun, [John].