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Oral History- Dennis Smith

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Student Interviewer's Name: Jordan S. Adams

Interviewee Name: Dennis Smith

Time and Location of Interview:

The interview was conducted within two different sessions on being November 25 and the latter, December 8 2016. The total amount of time of both interviews was roughly an hour. During the time of the interview only Mr. Smith and myself were present. The Interview took place in the Village Market at Southern Adventist University in Tennessee.

About Dennis Smith:

Dennis Smith was born 1955, in a small town within Missouri. Growing up he never was exposed to racial tension, or other races/cultures, due to the small rural town setting. Once out of high school, he felt no direction, or calling, which led him to sign up for military service. Once enlisted, Dennis left his rural community and traveled across the states where he received basic training. At fort Shephard and Lackland air force base in Texas, from there he would fly state side to Louisiana where he received more training. Once his training was done, he would be deployed to Germany, to the air force base of Bitburg. During this time, the cold war heightened, and all military bases within Germany were on alert. Zulu alert was always practiced in case of invasion, but once Victor Alert was commenced, nuclear war was inevitable.

Mr. Smith served in the air force for roughly six years, from 73-79. After which he came to Southern Adventist University, Chattanooga, where he studied theology. He now works as facility manager at the local Village Market on campus. He has regarded his military experience as an eye opener, being able to experience many cultures during his service has helped shape who he is today.

Dennis Smith, born 1955

Interviewer: Jordan S. Adams (JSA)

Interviewee: Dennis Smith (DS)

JSA: So, what is your name?

DS: Dennis Smith

JSA: Dennis Smith, and how old are you?

DS: 61

JSA: When were, you born?

DS: 1955

JSA: Okay, where did you grow up Dennis?

DS: Uhhh in the mid-west, Missouri

JSA: Missouri, okay, how did growing up in the mid-west in Missouri.....umm...affect you how did you view.... the world I guess around you?

DS: We were pretty isolated in the sense that believe it or not there were no black families that lived in that area at that time because there was still segregation. I grew up that way, but I didn't understand it as a young man. Once I went into the service that's when I got a taste of all the cultures of the world, but in my home town, all through my years of growing up, you hardly ever saw any cultural exchange, it was all white.

JSA: Okay, and.... So, when.... the civil rights movement started happen were you aware of it at that time or did it start occurring when you were in the service.

DS: No I was aware of it. When I went into the service in 1973, uhhhh it was already...it had already been there, and everyone there. You didn't see color in the service, you're just there to have the other guys back. It didn't matter what color, what race, or what religion you were. I mean there was still prejudice, but in the service, they were forced to not have any differences, because the way the government was working then, they were trying to force equality across the board, there was no more segregation in the military.

JSA: Okay...alright so.... you said that. You said earlier that when you entered the service, that was when the Vietnam war was winding down. So.... what were your thoughts...about the Vietnam War, when it was occurring?

DS: During when it was going?

JSA: Yeah.

DS: Um..well I knew it was tragic.uh..I did not agree with people..uh..the way they were treating soldiers, because they were just doing their job. That was probably the reason why I was interested in the service, cause you have a job to do and leaders tell you, they may be making a mistake about the war. I don't know..uh..I think it was..I felt like it was important to be there especially if you look at all the people that we were able to save...uh.. because there was a lot atrocities on women and children being murdered and we stopped that. But America has always been the police force of the world because we're such a super power. But uh.. I don't know if we necessarily needed to get into it, but since we did I think we had an obligation to finish it. So, when I went in it was winding down, I had a chance to go, but the lord obviously decided that I didn't need to go, because, uh, I ended up going overseas other than going to uh, well I suppose I should say my first base was down in Louisiana he had me go down to stateside because I felt that the lord has the power over that. Because I did not have to go to Germany [Vietnam]. My graduating class one half went to Germ.. went to uh.. Vietnam, ¼ went overseas, and ¼ went state side, and I was with the ¼ that went state side.

JSA: Okay, umm.... so, you said the Vietnam war um.. I guess get intrigued to join the military, right?

DS: Uh.. it did.. uh.. I did not know what I was going to do when I got out of high school and so.. I wasn't sure being an Adventist, conscious-objector where that would take me, and uh.. but I was able to get in and they accepted me. Didn't say I had a religious difficulty, because in a military life, military people believe that the military comes first, God is second, family is third, and your religion comes in last place. Which obviously as an Adventist I believe religion comes first, and so I did butt heads, but the Lord always took

care of me. My six years in the service I didn't train for anything, I should have stayed longer, but sometimes when we're young we think it's greener on the other side.

JSA: Okay.. uh..... Alright so what was rank during thee um.. when you were in the military or the Airforce?

DS: Well uh.. I moved up the ranks, last rank I was, was three stripes and back in '73 that was known as a buck-sergeant.

JSA: Buck-sergeant?

DS: So..yea.. I was coming up for staff-sergeant but L.. if I would have stayed in.. since I was getting out.. I qualified and I had taken the test to go ahead but I wasn't there long enough to go ahead and sow the stripes on. But I finished as a buck-sergeant. I went in as an airman, first-class, because I had junior ROTC in high school. So that caused me to bypass being an airman to airman first-class

JSA: Okay, um.. what is exactly is a buck-sergeant?

DS: A buck-sergeant? well uhh after I... well while I was in buck-sergeant they started to change it to senior-airman then they changed it back to buck-sergeant and I'm not sure what it is now. It's an airman is like an apprentice, a buck-sergeant is probably like a journeyman. I'm in training to become a enlisted sergeant which would be over other people, but in the present time I had bypassed the transition stage of being a basic apprentice. I was a maintenance specialist, I guess we call them specialists in the Air Force. I was still a specialist, but I was towards the end where I was to become an intermediate specialist, which I would be over the younger ones. That's basically the level I was at.

JSA: Alright.. okay so... so where.. where were you exactly stationed at?

DS: You start off in the military all Air Force personnel go to Lackland AirForce Base in San Antonio, Texas, you do your basic training, which is six to eight weeks. I believe it was six weeks there for me, then from there I went to Shepherd Air Force Base in Texas, I think that's Fort Worth I'm not quite sure now. I got my maintenance training and learned all about the aircraft, cause you do all that then from there, I went to Alexandria, Louisiana and did my job. From Alexandria, Louisiana I went to Bitburg and..and moved into the F-15's and from there I went out to um..... Phoenix, Arizona, there's an air base out there that had F-15's.

JSA: Okay.

DS: That's where I finished up my tour and I got out.

JSA: Okay.. alright.. and that was.. that was during the height of the Cold War right?

DS: Um.. yep.. yeah.. height of the cold war was around that time, I got out in '79.

JSA: Okay.

DS: And that is the height during the last part of.....because as soon as Vietnam was over, Korea didn't hit until later during that period and Russia was very heightened during that time. That was before the Berlin wall came down, once the Berlin wall came down things opened up a lot more. It wasn't as heightened because we were all alert 24/7

JSA: Mmhm, what were your thoughts about the Russians during that time?

DS: Well my thoughts about the Russians were, they were basically the same as us, we're, we're told that they put a lot of money into their military, they had a lot of people that did without. I felt like we we're a lot better off, we still put lots of money into it but we didn't have the people as bad off. They were a super power, we were a super power, they were communist, they disagreed with the way we did it, we disagreed with them. But when you think about it they're basically.. their military was doing the job that we're doing, they're just doing what their told. Its just two super powers close together, uh.. just messing with each other, because that's what we did on that base, we had planes that flew over their borders caused all of their alarms to go off. They would launch all their airplanes, and they would do the same to us, they called them the big bears, the big bombers they had. They would inch over, go over in our territory enough to get the alarms going off. Our basic aircraft would take off, "Zulu" and "Victor" alert, not Victor alert, that was the nuclear warheads. But Zulu alert is the fast planes they would assess, and if they kept coming.. they had lines you know on the map and if they crossed one, we'd go check it out, if they crossed another, then we would launch everything. Everybody has lines, and they know where their lines are, so it's just a game they play.

JSA: Can you tell me about the different alerts?

DS: Uh.... Well... we were on an active.. prepared alert, but when they crossed our borders, Zulu, which is two planes at the end of the runway. They are tied right there to the runway, and its two hangers and it's just like a firehouse. Pilots sleep upstairs, crews sleep upstairs and they slide down the poles, in their planes, on the runway... within three minutes, and that's not very much time, three minutes, and their up in the air, heading out to where the Russians crossed. Now while their doing that, when that happens, Victor alert, which is a base within a base, which protected by hard-core army recruits they would go immediately to active alert. Everyone would go and get ready. Pilots would head out with their plans, but they would not leave their area, until they got the final word. Now they may fire them up and they might be running, but their waiting to hear from these other two birds. Also we did the elephant walk, which is basically, we had one squadron of nuclear warheads, those planes never left, they didn't practice with those. When they left that means there going to be a nuclear warhead uh.. war. There's two squadrons outside of those, now what we would do is, they would go to alert and tell us, we would have to go out and get our planes ready, then they would take off. Zulu alert would take off, and all these other planes would take off. Then they would time it, all we were doing was using fuel, but what they would do is, they would not, Zulu alert would take off, but the other planes as they would come on, they would taxi to the end and go back where they would shut them down. That's called the elephant walk, all we did was waste fuel, but they knew that they were Russians outside the base and they were watching. They could report back and say, "they got all their planes off the air in thirty minutes." So, that was a deterrent to let them know, "hey, we can do it." Because they had a plan to take over our base and so we had to be ready, we carried gas masks on us all the time, we were trained to use them if there was an attack.

JSA: And how did you, how did you know that they had plans on attacking?

DS: Uh.. they, when I did my training... when the first F-15's came out, they brought us all into the theater and they did training for us. They showed us on a screen, what it looked

like, it look like a base, it looked like Bitburg. But there was an building that wasn't on the base, there was an empty field there. They said Russia had a complete scale model of Bitburg, every building, all the outside was done the interior was not. They built the buildings exactly what they looked like on the outside, they were gutted inside, but all those buildings they.. they had hard-core soldiers that practiced there. We thought it was Bitburg, and they said, "No that's the base in Russia, we there practiced to take this base." They had a building over there, they had a building over there that was uh.. not on our plans, but it was there and someone said, "What's that building?" "That's the building were going to build in two years." They had already stolen the plans and built the building. So that's how we knew, you know, that's how we knew it's serious, of course we had nuclear warheads on the base and they had to be protect. But the whole base was... we were all expendable... the only goal... that we had was to get the two Zulu alert planes up in the air, which they go up anyway their always first. But the squadron of fifteen, F-15s from Victor Alert, each of them carried in them a nuclear warhead, with a nuclear missile I think it had four different nuclear warheads on it I believe and those went to four different targets. The whole goal of that base was to get those fifteen planes off, once you got those fifteen planes off any other plane that took off was icing on the cake. That was the whole purpose was to... and that's why the army they would set up.. they would repel anything and their whole goal was to get those plane off the air. That's what the cold war did for us.. scared about nuclear war.

JSA: And what kind of planes were those?

DS: F-15s, F-15 Eagles, before that they had F-4 Phantoms there, but once we got ahold of Mig-25, the F-15 came out it started taking the place of everything.

JSA: And how did you get the Mig-25s?

DS: the Mig-25 was uh.. it was uh.. brought to us by a Russian pilot through Japan. He wanted asylum and since we're allies with Japan ever since Hiroshima they have a non-military pact with us that we protect them. So we went there and we umm.. took control of that plane. We completely dismantled it and built the F-15 after the Mig-25.

JSA: Okay.. um.. was it difficult to dismantle?

DS: It was in the sense that it was... I'm told they had to x-ray it. Because Russians don't let enlisted people work on their planes. Only officers, only particular people and there was uh. Even the pilots didn't know. The panels had to be removed in a certain order, even the pilots did not know that. So, it had to be x-rayed and figured out how to dismantle all the explosives in it, because it was a flying bomb.

JSA: So, it was basically booby-trapped?

DS: Yep, they booby-trapped every one of their planes, who knows maybe they do it today. We took it all apart and they requested their plane back, we did their plane back. We just gave it back in parts, in boxes

JSA: Okay.. um.... So did you ever visit the Soviet Union during your deployment?

DS: No I did not, um.. the Berlin. I could, you could cross the Berlin Wall, but at that time I was newly married and um.. that's kind of scary during the Cold War, not that I knew

anything extra ordinary. But to walk over on the Russian side, on East Berlin.. you know, because they could keep you. They liked having all the money over there from the tourists and stuff, and the military, once you went to Berlin the families went through one gate, and all the military went through another gate and you know their taking your pictures and stuff. Like I said, I was just a maintenance specialist, but I'm in their country, they could have easily kept anyone they wanted I just really did not want that so I did not go over there.

JSA: Okay..um.. So you said you got out of the military towards the end of the 70's.

DS: Yep, '79.

JSA: Alright, what did you do afterwards?

DS: After that I got out in 79 and..um.. I uh.. I came to Southern, to study theology. I came here in 80 and 81.....

JSA: Did your military service ever change your outlook?

DS: It changed my outlook when I went in. I realized I had a very... I think where I went to school I had a very much, I had friends and stuff, but I had a sheltered life. I didn't come across other cultures. In the military I was able to experience all kinds of cultures and a lot of... and sometimes some of them surprised me. When I was in Germany, Luxemburg was right there close, well the people there are French and I went to church there and a man came up and started kissing my cheeks. I backed away because.. a guy kissing me..come on. So I learned just one thing.. I learned that different cultures do things differently and you have to learn to adjust and you know. So I had it.. the military opened my eyes to a world of different types of people, and the military was good to me.

JSA: Okay so, when the wall finally came down, what were your thoughts on that?

DS: I thought that was tremendous, because I felt like communism opened it up to the people to have more freedoms and stuff. Because I totally disagree with communism, even though in some instances you can see in history that it worked, but overall there was just too many people that were doing without. So I was hoping that would open things up. The people in communist countries, not just Russia that would all be better for all.

JSA: Did you ever think about going back to Russia, or back to Bitburg?

DS: I think about it all the time, and one of these times I will go back to see the people. I lived above a farmer, me and my wife did, we loved to go back and see them. I liked to go back and see the base, it's just a regular airport now for that town. The base all moved out, but I'd love to go see it, hopefully before I die I'd like to go back once just to be able to see the area, maybe do a little traveling around there that would be kind of nice.

JSA: Did it ever... when you were in the military, did it ever get political.. at any time?

DS: Well political has always been there, but for the military guy, whatever the political people decide pretty much is what were stuck with. Elections and stuff went on, everyone had their opinions and stuff but um.. there's a lot of politics in Germany at that time. All the time when I was there in Germany in '78..'77 and '78, all the time I.. and I didn't notice at first, but older Germans would give you the peace sign, but it wasn't the peace sign, it

was them telling you, “There’s two of us for every one of you.” Cause they were still upset because you know, because of World War II. So, um.. but still ther was a lot of good people and stuff, but there’s politics, politics never stop it’s just something have to adjust around.

JSA: And if you were to give advice to future generations, what would it be?

DS: Future generations.. well.. take a look at things that have happened in the past and try to make it better. I’m a little weird about this younger generation, because there use to just getting everything, and I come from a period of time where you worked for everything. You didn’t wait for things to happen, you made things happen, and it’s not that they don’t work it’s just um...well.. For millennials nowadays their technology, they’re able to deal with all kinds of technology, but they can’t fix squat. They’re not in to that, you know, if it doesn’t work they send it off, where in my period of time, if something wasn’t working you tried to make it work or you worked around it. So, it’s a big change that I’ve seen there’ll be some interesting challenges for young people. I’m sure there’ll come through with flying colors, but as an older person I’m concerned because I don’t see them with the values that I think are important. But there’ll learn... everyone does.

JSA: Alright, thank you Mr. Smith.

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