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Serving in the Air Force with James Hixson

Diana Mendoza
Southern Adventist University

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Student Interviewer's Name: Diana Mendoza

Interviewee Name: James A. Hixson

Time and Location of Interview

The interview was conducted in two sessions at Bradley Healthcare & Rehab Center Cleveland. On November 4 and 10, 2016, it lasted roughly 40 and only the interviewer and interviewee were present.

About James A. Hixson

James A. Hixson was born on January 12, 1933 in Cleveland, Tennessee. He served in the Air Force from 1952-1956. This interview goes through his life before the Air Force and after. Although his serving time is small, the stories he had to offer were greatly appreciated and are genuinely interesting. A Christian and family man above all else, the surprise of what this man accomplished with God by his side is astounding.

Interviewer: Diana Mendoza (DM)

Interviewee: James Hixson (JH)

DM: Alright let's just get started! So why don't you tell me about life before the Air Force? You were in the Air Force correct?

JH: Yeah, I worked at a paper mill and after I retired from that went straight into the Air Force. I used to love to race boats and stuff and yeah but you mainly want to hear about me in the Air Force right?

DM: Yeah, ha, I'll get there eventually.

JH:(chuckles)

DM: So were you enlisted or did you volunteer?

JH: I volunteered.

DM: Okay why?

JH: There was no war at the time...

DM: Your right.

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JH: That's not a reason it's just happened to be that way and I got on this train. My mom and dad took me from Cleveland to Chattanooga to get on the train and I got on it. It was going to take me to my...first place I was going to be involved with and that train was loaded with girls going to flight attendant school and they well they...well I can't tell you that.

DM: (laughs) It's okay it's okay. Your good so anyways where were you first stationed at?

JH: Where I was first stationed at? I went to-to well let me think I keep forgetting! I'm 83/84..

DM: Oh wow, congratulations.

JH: Why thank you. It's because I was very active in sports but anyway I went to awh fuck...San Antonio, Texas and when I got there I said good I won't be going to Dallas because those girls were awful on the train. They tried to get me to do so many things but you don't want to talk about that.

DM: So you were living on base correct?

JH: Well I went down there and when I got there they said We are taking four B-50 aircrafts so four engine bombers very big and, uh, I was going to take them back to Dallas and I was going to have to stay with them and unlock and lock them up but I really didn't want to go because those girls were there and I didn't do things they wanted me to do.

DM: Yes?

JH: These guys came up to a fence and said well we are going to take the train to Dallas and I've got a good relationship with God a great one in fact. And it felt like he was always going, oh no, not again. I would pray "Oh dear God it's Jim again" (chuckles) "Dear God they want to send me to Dallas and I can't get back on the train." I didn't even get out of my seat I kept saying "no way" and I said "please dear God send me to somewhere rather than to Dallas." I would have rather been sent anywhere else and right then one of the guys came back and said "Jim, I just got word from this buddy of mine and it turns out your not going to be able to go to Dallas."

DM: Wow!

JH: He said they were going to send me to, uh, to another base to go to school on the B-50 engine. Yeah and I was just so grateful to God and I didn't have to go. So I went up there and they put me in a class and there was about 30 something other guys leaning against the wall and a man says...well actually my buddy Vera, he was a good friend, when of my best

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in the Air Force and I knew him very well. The guy started to ask for two volunteers and when your serving in anything you never volunteer. I said I'll volunteer! Vera turned to me and said you crazy! (laughs) I said Vera there's 12 inches of snow out there on the ground and it's still snowing so there ain't nothing we going to do out there. And so he said well one more volunteer. I turned to Vera and told him it was going to be something good and I just knew it was because of how bad it was snowing outside no way they are putting us out in the snow! All the guys were laughing and yelling "yay one volunteer let's get us another one!" Well Vera just went "Oh God, might as well volunteer." The rest of the men were laughing and cheering for the two crazy people. (clapping)

DM: Well yeah I can imagine!

JH: The man told us to follow him and that we were going to Puerto Rico.

DM: Wait you went to Puerto Rico? (disbelief)

JH: Well yeah, we went to Puerto Rico and it was a warm 86 degrees. (laughs)

DM: (Laughs)

JH: Well them men just flipped out, yelling about how they had seniority and how it wasn't fair but the man just said that they had their chance. So I went to Puerto Rico me and Vera. It was a little touch and go flying over there though.

DM: Yeah, I was going to ask if you had flown overseas and you definitely did.

JH: Yup, flew across the ocean and the whole time Vera was groaning "I don't know why!" The plane was jerking around all over the place. I kept saying, oh my oh my, in my head. Vera was saying how he wished we didn't do this. "I'm scared to death and we are going to end up having to jump out and then I'll be 200-300 yards away from you and those sharks will eat me up!" But I kept saying that not to listen.

JH: When I got into Puerto Rico, they made me and Vera both assistant crew chiefs and it's supposed to take 8 years to get that job but we made it in 3 weeks.

DM: Let me get this straight you were in the Air Force for 3 weeks before getting a job that was way above your experience level?

JH: Yeah this guy was discharged and so he left and they brought us in.

DM: Okay so what specifics did you have to do?

JH: Well my job was we basically, had to have a plane ready at all times so have the engine up, check the wires and do all kinds of things and make sure everything was running right. I laid up on them while the engine is running just fixing things and these are huge planes boy I'll tell you that. Anyway we did that.

DM: How many years did you do this for?

JH: I was there for the rest of my time.

DM: Oh, okay, so you were on Puerto Rico for the rest of the time you served?

JH: I stayed there for the rest of my time. Now this man came up and said oh he was the crew chief. He said he was going to a party they were having and" it's been four years in the making but we haven't been able to go. So I'm going and leaving you here to meet a plane. It's at 10,000 feet but it will be in at 11 o'clock and you're the man who's going to get ahold of the tire." He took me down and told me that I had to talk to the tower and confirm the time the plane was landing so I could meet them when they come in. Y'll ain't seen this plane it's big! It's got a 140 foot wing span (proceeds to making deep airplane engines noises and stretching out his arms) and it was all four engines running. So they had replaced a ramp off the runaway and they didn't finish it in time and they were telling us that we were going to have to guide that plane down that ramp. It could very well fall off(shows how it was 3 feet of concrete off the ground) It was about 3 feet and so I said okay so I called well I didn't call this air policeman came up to us and asked us what we were doing here. I said that I was going to meet the plane but he just scoffed so I asked him why he didn't believe him and he said that people had been breaking into some B-29s every night with two guys with flashlights. And they were stealing stuff I kept telling him that I wasn't one of these guys but he didn't believe me and I kept saying that I could prove it to him by calling the tower. So he called and I prayed to God saying "Hey God it's Jim again and I'm going to be in a lot of trouble soon because this ramp is too short on the sides in other words if they turned the wheel than they would drop off the 3 foot drop. It would destroy the plane completely. It's kind of interesting isn't it?

DM: Yeah definitely please keep going!

JH: So I asked God to help me and I said that I needed him badly and explained the situation even though I'm sure he knew. I said to God that I needed him to guide the plane safely and I didn't know if he was there or not. Well the plane started to come and I could hear the engines rumbling(makes engines noises) there were 22 men on the crew and they got out onto the runway and I started guiding the plane down the runaway. I had to stand in front of the plane and I couldn't see in the back this plane had four big tires. So I turned the plane and got it close to where it was supposed to be. I started to pray again as I started moving backwards and than God took over. I swear I'm not lying, I had a good relationship with God.

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DM: I can definitely see that

JH: Isn't that interesting?

DM: Yes!

JH: And God liked me because I'm not sure he would have done those things for me if otherwise. There was a huge 50 slope to come down the runway and I could barely hear with the propellers and I inched my way and made it to the end. Let me think, um, oh the captain jumped out to greet me and he asked if I was the new crew chief and the captain was in complete disbelief asking how the hell I landed this plane. I said I had God helping me and he said he wouldn't touch that with a ten foot pole.(chuckles) So I did that, oh God. It's very scary to be right next to these planes.

DM: Did you ever personally fly any planes?

JH: Did I ever fly any? Well I rode on them. I got to sit in the nose and I rode all over the world.

DM: What's the most interesting place you've been too?

JH: I went to Alaska on two 7 month tours and they photo-mapped Alaska. They were flying and they went down to make a map, it was huge, and put it on there and they would turn and come back until they got the whole place mapped. Things had changed so they needed to go again. I loved that wow. I had it made. I'd lay up on the nose and it was scary but it felt amazing. A buddy of mine went to another base and I'd get to see him every once a while.

DM: So why did you leave the Air Force? It sounds like you loved it.

JH: Best years of my life. But as I was nearing the end of my tour they asked me to go on another one and fly all over the world and boy did I want to say yes. But my mama she didn't want me going so I left the Air Force and told them to give the job to a friend of mine who said yes immediately. I always prayed to God when I needed him(continues to make airplane noises)

DM: So since this was after your service, what were your thoughts when President Kennedy was assassinated?

JH: Kennedy? He was assassinated? I didn't like that but wait he was assassinated? I don't remember. (laughs)

DM: Oh well, yes, he was but it's okay if you don't remember.

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JH: (chuckles) guess my memory is going but yeah that's all the good stories I had and after the service I just lived a simple life.

DM: What was your life like after the war?

JH: Well one day I was working on something in my dad's store and in came a man looking for him. My dad wasn't there but he stayed and I could feel him watching me work on these engine things or something so I kept working and after I finished the man was so shocked. He came up to me and told me he was a professor and he could never do what in time in the little amount of time he was there. He straight up told him to go to his school and teach a class because I was smarter than him. I was smarter than a professor! (laughs) Yeah that was my life.

DM: Well thank you so much for your time.

JH: Thank you(chuckles) I told you I had some interesting stories and by the power of God I'm still here.

DM: Yes praise to God and thank you for sharing!