

Interview with Kermit Wayne Bell

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Interviewer: Pete Harbison

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Harbison: My name is Pete Harbison. I work with the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library and Museum. I’m doing an oral history project. I’m in Batchtown, Illinois. It is August 27, 2015, and I’m interviewing Dr. Kermit Bell as part of the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library *Veterans Remember* Oral History Project. Mr. Bell, or I should call you Dr. Bell?

Bell: Whatever (laughs).

Harbison: First of all, could you tell me when and where you were born?

Bell: I was born right here in this area, about 100 yards from where we’re sitting, in 1928, March 20.

Harbison: Just an interesting question to start off with.



Dr. Kermit Bell

Did you have any interest in the military growing up?

Bell: Not really. I was interested in the fact that my dad had been in the service. I knew that, but I had no real idea what the military was about until World War II started breaking out.

Harbison: And you had brothers that served.

Bell: Yes.

Harbison: Can you tell me briefly about that?

Bell: The first thing I remember was Pearl Harbor Day. I remember listening to that on radio. I remember this old lady telling me that this is going to be the end of the world. But just before Pearl Harbor day, my oldest brother had been in the draft, was down in Tennessee taking basic training. My uncle had been drafted and had gone in, taken basic training and had been released, under the deal of they were only going to stay in one year.

When Pearl Harbor happened, there was much more awareness that we were in a fight. Then the second brother was drafted, and then the third brother, a year later, enlisted in the Marines. I stayed home during all that.

Harbison: You would have been in high school.

Bell: Yes.

Harbison: Can you tell me about how you entered the military?

Bell: Well, I entered the military—I've got that in some of my notes there too—I was drafted my last year in high school, about two weeks after my eighteenth birthday, and that wouldn't have let me finish high school. So I went down to the recruiting station and volunteered to join, with the agreement that they would not call me in until after high school, when I graduated. So we did that, and I went in the Army a couple days after graduation from high school.

Harbison: In 1940...

Bell: Forty-six.

Harbison: Nineteen forty-six. What do you recall about your first days in the service?

Bell: Well, I didn't think it was any big deal. I just did what they told me to. I was sworn in, down in East St. Louis. I rode a train to Chicago for induction or whatever, where they outfitted me with clothing and everything. And then they shipped me from Fort Sheridan, Chicago, to San Antonio, Texas, for basic training.

Harbison: How effective was your training?

Bell: The training really was good but not very stringent. They weren't very hard on us or anything because the war was over, and the people that were training us were sort of relaxed. But we had a good basic training. We had the arms training and marching and indoctrinations and all, but it was actually a very short basic training. We fired the M1 carbines. We didn't use the (M1) Garand rifle in basic training, down there at that time. They just left that out. We didn't get any machine gun training. We did get bivouac training, gas training and so forth. It was sufficient.

Harbison: Where were you first stationed after boot camp?

Bell: After that, after basic training, I was sent to Spokane, Washington, to a place called Geiger Field, which was an engineer center for Army aviation engineers, people that build runways. I went through a technical school there on soil testing and determining compaction rates so we could get the ground solid enough for an airplane to land on it. That was a test run to see if enlisted men could do that work.

Harbison: How did it go?

Bell: It went well. I got to use it one time. The rest of the time I was doing administrative work for different units. I was promoted accidentally and very rapidly (laughs). I never did make private first class. Somebody came around with a promotion list. They had to put some people in orders, so I went right from private to corporal.

Then I was with an engineer maintenance company in the aviation engineers. We formed a cadre and organized from scratch. (It) started out first with one captain and me. It built up with some more, and we got on a troop train and traveled down to Fort Warren, Wyoming, which was being taken over and being made into an engineer training center in Cheyenne, Wyoming.

I stayed with the unit there, and they built up to full strength. Then they were ready to move out and go to Alaska. I didn't want to go to Alaska, so I convinced them... I won't go into the details of it, but I convinced them to let me out of the unit, assign me to another unit on post and stay there. It has to do with... When you signed up for the regular Army in those days, you had specific things that they promised you, and my promise was that I would go to the Caribbean if I signed up.

Harbison: Good promise (laughs).

Bell: Yeah. Never got to the Caribbean either (laughs). So I stayed there, working with a headquarters unit, doing administrative work, until this one day there was an opportunity to go to truck driver school. I asked my boss if I could go to truck driver school. Of course, I had applied for a couple of other schools too.

He said, "You're always wanting to go to school. Why the hell don't you go to West Point?" That night I found out about the procedure, where

enlisted men could compete to go to West Point. So I put in the application, and pretty soon I was sent to what they call the Military Academy Prep [Preparatory] School.

Harbison: Where was that located?

Bell: In Newburgh, New York, at Stewart Field. They still have it, but not there. I believe 160 to 180 of us got appointments, but only forty could get in, so we competed. We had classes which actually were more stringent than West Point.

We were up and in class by 7:30 each day. At noon we had our lunch hour and then right back into class. At 3:00, we were in athletics. At 7:30 we were back in class, a study hall type of class at night. That went on until 9:30. Then you were released to go right back to the barracks and go to bed.

Harbison: Lights out.

Bell: And we would all rush to the little snack shop and try to get a sandwich before we went to bed. Most of us had standing orders at the sandwich shop to have them ready for us, waiting for us. But anyway, I went through the school, and we took our competitive exam.

Out of the large group that was there, I wound up somewhere around fifty-two, fifty-three, which meant I wasn't going to make it. So I started searching, on the advice of some other people, for Congressional appointments.¹ I got a couple of alternate Congressional appointments, which would not have gotten me in, but out of that fifty-some odd, they gradually started disappearing down the line. Some were failing physicals. Some were just quitting, changing their minds about going in. One boy was pulled out because his dad was the leader of a communist cell in Chicago. Anyway, the numbers started being cut out below me, and I kept coming down in order, until the day before admission day, they called me up and said, "You're in." (Harbison laughs)

Harbison: What was West Point like?

¹ Members of Congress may nominate military academy applicants who meet the eligibility requirements established by law. A candidate may seek a nomination from a member of the U.S. House of Representatives who represents the congressional district in which the candidate resides or both U.S. Senators from his or her state. (<https://walberg.house.gov/services/military-academy-nominations/military-academy-nominations-faq>)

Bell: West Point was actually pretty easy for me. They talk about the hard life of plebes [freshman cadets] and all, but I just let it roll off my back. Academically, I had no trouble the first year because of the prep school. Prep school had been hard on us in math and English and so forth. I got through the first year very good. Academically, I was alright; I wasn't an exceptional student.

My standing in the class kept going down because the youngsters without military experience that had come in started blossoming, and I wasn't competitive enough. But anyway, I managed to graduate. That's all it takes.

Harbison: Yeah, the guy who graduates last at West Point, you know what they call him? Officer.

Bell: Yeah, lieutenant.

Harbison: Lieutenant colonel, right?

Bell: No, lieutenant, then.

Harbison: Okay, I'm sorry. After West Point, where were you stationed?

Bell: I was assigned to what was called, at that time, anti-aircraft artillery and sent to El Paso, Texas, Fort Bliss, for basic officer training. That's where you became more familiar with the type of guns, specific. At West Point, they train you academically; they don't train you specifically for any branch. You get some military training and arms training at West Point, but you don't get training in the heavier weapons. My training down there...

Harbison: And what year was this?

Bell: This would have been 1952. After four months there, in the basic training, I was shipped out to the Hanford Atomic Works in Richland, Washington.²

Harbison: And your job there was...?

Bell: My job there was battery officer in an anti-aircraft artillery unit, 120 millimeter guns that I had never seen.

Harbison: Made sure no one attacked the nuclear facility?

Bell: Yes, yes. It was a defense set up to protect this facility. We had radar guided guns, and we could pick up any aircraft at long ranges and bring them in. As soon as we picked one up, of course, the guns were trained on them. Then information went to the Air Force, who had jets up in the air chasing them.

² Established in 1943 as part of the Manhattan Project, the Hanford Site is a decommissioned nuclear production complex operated by the United States federal government on the Columbia River in Benton County in the U.S. state of Washington. The site has been known by many names, including Hanford Project, Hanford Works, Hanford Engineer Works and Hanford Nuclear Reservation. (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hanford_Site)

The jets would guide him out of the area and make him land someplace to find out who he was. We never fired a shot in anger.

It was an arduous experience because we were stationed out in this desert, living in tents. We would spend fourteen days out there, and then we'd get to go home for two days.

Harbison: Where would you go on leave?

Bell: Well, I was married at the time, and my family was in the Kennewick-Richland area. So [I] just went home to see the family, stay there.

Harbison: When you left there, did you go to Korea?

Bell: Yes. The next year, I was pulled out of there and sent to Korea, 1953. I wound up in Korea, assigned to another anti-aircraft unit, the 30th Artillery Battalion, located on the west coast of Korea at Kansan. Our job there was mainly to protect an air base. We had forty millimeter anti-aircraft weapons. Again, we never fired a shot in anger. We fired one, one night, at one of our own planes.

Harbison: Oops.

Bell: No, he didn't turn on his identifier. We put a round through his tail, and he landed safely. (Harbison laughs)

Harbison: And how long were you in Korea?

Bell: I was in Korea about a year. That particular unit, then, was transferred or moved to Japan. I wasn't in Korea quite a year, maybe six to eight months, and the war was over, essentially. We were in the no firing stage.

We moved back to Japan, so we could pick up a more modern weapon. You couldn't bring any weapons into Korea, but if we went to Japan, we could pick up the new weapons. We reorganized, and if anything broke out, we could be air lifted into Korea in a hurry. So we went back to Japan, and we traded our forty millimeters for seventy-five millimeter radar guided weapons called the Skysweeper.³

Harbison: It's a lot more sophisticated.

Bell: Yes, a lot more lethal. I stayed with that unit. Came back to the states around 1955 and was assigned again to a Skysweeper unit in Castle Air Base in Merced, California. Now, we kind of laughed about our mission. It was to defend the area against low flying submarine launched missiles. But in reality, our purpose was to be where we could be fast shipped to a place like Lebanon or Syria or somewhere in the [Middle East].

³ M51 Skysweeper was an anti-aircraft gun deployed in the early 1950s by both the U.S. Army and U.S. Air Force. It was the first such gun to combine a gun laying radar, analog computer and an autoloader on a single carriage. (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/M51_Skysweeper)

We did prepare to load out two or three times, but the trip was canceled before we got off the ground. Castle Air Base was a B-52 base, and we also provided security for nuclear weapons. We would escort them from the bunker to the airplane, and we didn't know whether we were escorting a weapon or an empty barrel.

Harbison: You assumed it was a weapon.

Bell: Yes. They were always shrouded with canvas. From Castle Air Base, I was getting antsy about my career in the Army. I was almost ready to quit when I was selected early to go to advanced artillery training, so I stayed in.

Harbison: Could you have gotten out at that time?

Bell: Oh, yes.

Harbison: Your commitment was up?

Bell: Uh-huh. I could quit anytime I wanted to then. I went to the advanced artillery course at Fort Sill, Oklahoma, which is one year. After the advanced artillery course, I was probably one of the younger, by terms of service, in the class, but I was still a lieutenant. Usually that's captains or above in that class.

After the advanced artillery course, I was sent to Fort Riley, Kansas, to the 7th Field Artillery. That was my first experience with field artillery, the 105 canons.⁴ I was assigned as operations officer with a battalion, 7th Artillery Battalion.

After about a year there, I unexpectedly got notice from the Pentagon that I was being sent back to Fort Sill, assigned to teach nuclear weapons, nuclear weapons employment, not how to handle the weapons, but how to use them. So I spent three years there doing that.

Harbison: Teaching.

Bell: Uh-huh. And I... Well, let's see now; let me back up a little bit.

Harbison: When were you in Germany?

Bell: I'm sorry.

Harbison: When were you in Germany?

Bell: This was after that.

Harbison: You were in Germany before Fort Sill?

⁴ The 105 mm M101A1 howitzer (previously designated M2A1) is an artillery piece developed and used by the United States. It was the standard U.S. light field howitzer in World War II and saw action in both the European and Pacific theaters.

(https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/M101_howitzer#:~:text=The%20105%20mm%20M101A1%20howitzer,the%20European%20and%20Pacific%20theaters.)

Bell: No.

Harbison: Oh, after Fort Sill, after teaching?

Bell: Yes. While I was at Fort Riley teaching, I was sent to an air-ground coordination school, where you coordinate fire between the Air Force and ground troops, down in Biloxi, Mississippi. While I was there, I was promoted to captain. Came back and then went to the artillery schools, to teach nuclear weapons as a captain.

After three years teaching, I was given orders. This was sometime around 1961. I was sent to Germany, to the 14th Armored Cav [14th Cavalry Regiment], the unit that was assigned to defend the border, east-west zone, between U. S. and Russia.⁵

Harbison: And what town was it near?

Bell: I'm sorry.

Harbison: Was it Fulda?

Bell: Fulda, Germany. Fulda is a famous invasion gap, coming from the east to the west. The 14th Armored Cav was a famous cavalry unit, and I was commanding a battery of 105 armored howitzers. After a year in command there, I...

Harbison: And once again, you didn't take a shot at the enemy.

Bell: That's right.

Harbison: (laughs) Your record's perfect.

Bell: After a year there, I was transferred to the Fifth Corps in Frankfurt and assigned to the G1 Division.⁶ I had additional duties of preparing nuclear deployment plans. They would loan me from the G1 Division to the G3 Division. No big deal, I just did the paperwork and signed off on it.

Harbison: You told me, when we met the first time, about President [John F.] Kennedy's trip. You were somewhat involved in that?

Bell: Yes. The G1 Division would be given all responsibility for coordinating things like that. (noise in background)

Harbison: Oh, it appears your TV is...

Bell: I had it on pause. Let me...

⁵The 14th Cavalry Regiment of the United States Army has two squadrons that provide reconnaissance, surveillance, and target acquisition for Stryker brigade combat teams.

(https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/14th_Cavalry_Regiment)

⁶V Corps, formerly known as the Fifth Corps, is a regular corps of the United States Army at Fort Knox. It was previously active during World War I, World War II, Cold War, Kosovo, and the War on Terrorism.

([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/V_Corps_\(United_States\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/V_Corps_(United_States)))

Harbison: Okay. Let's go back to where you were in Germany. We were talking about the Kennedy trip.

Bell: While I was assigned in G1, we got word that President Kennedy was making a trip to Europe, and the G1 Division was assigned the job of coordinating many aspects of his visit. I had to coordinate making sure that we had a mess hall set up with the best of china and the best tablecloths and best food, make sure it had a fresh paint job and so forth, and to set up a reviewing stand.

I didn't have to do any of that; I just had to coordinate it. Then I also got the job of coordinating the president's sister. I couldn't tell you which one it was at this time. [Eunice Kennedy Shriver]

Harbison: Was it Ethel [Ethel Kennedy, the president's sister-in-law]?

Bell: Probably was, but I don't know for sure. What she wanted to do was to visit orphanages. I just had to call the aviation units and make sure they had a helicopter there to transport her anyplace she wanted to go. I actually never got to see her. (laughs)

Harbison: Behind the scenes, so to speak.

Bell: Well, I was in my office, and the helicopter landed maybe 500 yards away, to pick her up. My family got to go listen to the president speak over...

Harbison: Your wife and kids?

Bell: My son, one son.

Harbison: One son.

Bell: I don't know; she might have taken both of them, but the youngest son would have only been two years old then, maybe three. They had a good visit over there.

I wanted to collect the podium that he used for his speech there, but somebody stole that before I could get hold of it.

He went on from there to Berlin where he made his famous speech about "*Ich bin ein Berliner*."⁷

Harbison: Which means?

Bell: I am a Berliner. But there is some talk about he used the wrong word. That's the total sum of my encounter with the Kennedys on that visit.

⁷"*Ich bin ein Berliner*" ("I am a Berliner") is a speech by United States President John F. Kennedy, given on June 26, 1963, in West Berlin. It is widely regarded as the best-known speech of the Cold War and the most famous anti-communist speech. Afterward it would be suggested that Kennedy had got the translation wrong—that by using the article *ein* before the word *Berliner*, he had mistakenly called himself a jelly doughnut. In fact, Kennedy was correct. To state *Ich bin Berliner* would have suggested being born in Berlin, whereas adding the word *ein* implied being a Berliner in spirit. His audience understood that he meant to show his solidarity. (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ich_bin_ein_Berliner)

Harbison: From Germany, you...?

Bell: From Germany... I finished my time there and, of course, the commanding general was leaving the same time I was, so he had a big parade. I claimed that the parade was for me (laughs). But anyway, he and I both went back to the States. At the same time, he went to the Pentagon as vice chief of staff for the Army, and I went to an assignment at East Tennessee State University in Johnson City, Tennessee, as senior ROTC [Reserve Officer Training Corps] instructor. That would have been 1964. After three years in that job, and having run through several good ROTC students, I got orders to go to Vietnam.

Harbison: Some of these kids that were in the ROTC were already going over to Vietnam, of course.

Bell: Yeah, sure. I ran into a lot of them later. I had a lot of letters from them, thanking me for having known me, just wishing me good. I think I saw one of them when I was over in Vietnam.

(pause to adjust microphone)

When I got to Vietnam, I was assigned to the 1st Infantry Division and the division artillery.

Harbison: This was 1967?

Bell: Yes, August 1967. By the time I got there, there was no battalion commander slots left open, and I was asked to take a job as a deputy to the division artillery commander. I've always had the attitude that when I was asked to do something, I would do it. So I said, "If I can do it, I'd be glad to." I spent the whole year as a coordinator of a base camp of several thousand men, 256 helicopters...

Harbison: What was the name of the base again?

Bell: Phú Lợi. It had another name, called Thủ Dầu Một. I have no idea. [Phú Lợi is a ward of Thủ Dầu Một in Bình Dương Province in Vietnam.] I think Thủ Dầu Một may have been a name given to the place by the French. I don't know who called it Phú Lợi. That might have been the Japanese, but somehow or the other it had those two names. It was an airbase that had been used by the French, by the Japanese, and then by us.

Harbison: Where was it located?

Bell: It's about twenty, thirty miles north of Saigon. It had a runway that was rather short. We had a few fixed wing aircraft that had a little difficulty negotiating the length of the runway. They had to hold their foot on the brake and get up to full power before they let the plane roll. I always say they had to reverse their props before they hit the runway coming back in. It was mighty close. I know, when they reversed the props, it was ready for touchdown. Those were twin engine Mohawk aircraft and very valuable aircraft.

Harbison: What was their mission in Vietnam?

Bell: Intelligence, intelligence gathering. They had side looking radar. All of the helicopters were either troop carrying helicopters or gunships.

Harbison: And what kind of helicopters?

Bell: They were Hueys and the twin rotor helicopters, like HC47s, I believe. We had a couple of little Bell [Bell 47] Helicopters, which are observation helicopters.

Harbison: Those weren't named for you now, were they?

Bell: No (both laugh). My first job when I got there... I was immediately assigned to be a part of division artillery. But then, one of the assistant division commanders came down there and started outlining more details of my job, wanting to know what I could do about securing the aircraft and so forth. He asked me if I thought I could get revetments built in a hurry for the helicopters.⁸

Harbison: What exactly are those?

Bell: Revetments are just walls on each side of them to protect them from shrapnel. They said that we can't have any more helicopters damaged by rockets because they're too expensive and too much needed for our job.

So he said, "How long will it take you to get revetments built for all these?" Well, I had no idea. I'd never built a revetment in my life. So I said, "Sir, I'll have them done in thirty days if you give me the help I need." He said, "Well, you've got it," and I got it done in thirty days.

Harbison: He gave you the help.

Bell: Yep. Well, he just told me to order the people to get it done. I had an engineer company assigned to that base, and it was their job to get the revetments in. I would pull some additional soldiers out as necessary, to help with scud work. I had them work as much as sixteen hours a day to get the job done. They wanted to stop for maintenance, and I wouldn't let them. I said, "You go till the machine stops itself, and then we'll get another one." But we got the job done in thirty days, and that meant that any rockets coming in may get one helicopter, but it wouldn't get a dozen of them.

Harbison: So, did you ever experience rocket attacks at the base?

⁸ A revetment, in military aviation, is a parking area for one or more aircraft that is surrounded by blast walls on three sides. These walls are as much about protecting neighboring aircraft as it is to protect the aircraft within the revetment; if a combat aircraft fully loaded with fuel and munitions was to somehow ignite, by accident or design, then this risks starting a chain reaction as the destruction of an individual aircraft could easily set ablaze its neighbors.
([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Revetment_\(aircraft\)#:~:text=A%20revetment%2C%20in%20military%20aviation,blast%20walls%20on%20three%20sides.](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Revetment_(aircraft)#:~:text=A%20revetment%2C%20in%20military%20aviation,blast%20walls%20on%20three%20sides.))

Bell: I don't know where I've got the write up, when I got the Bronze Star for Valor. I didn't think it was any big deal, but the rockets were coming in. I jumped in my jeep and went out to clear the runway, make sure it was clear, so the observation planes could take off. I got caught out there, in the middle of a rocket attack. It was like being in the middle of the Fourth of July. I didn't think anything about it.

The next thing I know, I'm getting a Bronze Star for Valor for doing it. It wasn't a tremendous effort or a bit heroic on my part, but I was exposed to the fire. I didn't feel like I was. The one radio message I got from the DIVARTY [Armored Division Artillery] commander was "Get your butt back in here!" (Harbison laughs) I just went back on the radio and said, "I can't hear you." I was laying in a ditch. I was safer there than getting up and running.

Harbison: Yeah, sure.

Bell: There's one event that I supposedly stole the helicopter at night, when we couldn't get an observation plane in the air, and nobody was there to fly that helicopter. A lot of times I'd be going out with the pilots, and they'd be teaching me to fly it. They never taught me to land it or take it off.

Harbison: So how was the takeoff?

Bell: Well, the takeoff was shaky, but I got up in the air. Once you get it up in the air, I could fly it. But I stole a helicopter and got up in the air. From that point on, my memory has shut down.

Harbison: Why do you think that?

Bell: That's a psychological thing, they tell me, that when you go into combat or battle, a lot of times you know nothing of what's going on until it's over, and that's essentially...

Harbison: So you don't remember seeing anything when you were out?

Bell: No, but I was out there.

Harbison: How long were you in the air?

Bell: Oh, I don't know, fifteen minutes, twenty minutes. What I know about is what they told me the next morning, that I directed fire on the rocket positions and so forth. That's when the Vietnamese government got into it. They gave me the decoration for doing that. The next morning at breakfast, the DIVARTY commander said, "Some SOB stole one of my helicopters last night and crashed it. If I can find out who it is, I'm going to have his butt."

Harbison: Did he know?

Bell: He knew.

Harbison: He knew.

- Bell: And he just looked at me and kind of laughed (Harbison laughs).
- Harbison: So you crash landed?
- Bell: Yeah, I brought it in, and I couldn't make it land, and so finally I just shut the power off.
- Harbison: Down you came.
- Bell: Yeah.
- Harbison: Gravity took over.
- Bell: Yeah. I did have a pilot license for fixed wing. I knew that a lot of times you could land fixed wing very easily by just shutting the power off and glide it in. Well, that wasn't the thing to do, because torque takes effect. You shut the power off, it starts spinning. But I was low enough to the ground that it didn't get to make very many spins.
- Harbison: Did you get hurt?
- Bell: No, I purposely brought this thing down... My mind was back to working, and I said, "I'm in trouble." (both laugh) I purposely landed it quite a ways away from where they'd be any audience and got out of it and ran.
- Harbison: But the Vietnamese recognized your effort.
- Bell: They wrote up a thing on it. But the best thing I can say about it is they made a valiant effort to describe what happened. I'm sure that I didn't do as much as they say in the decorations.
- It was a few weeks later, I had the notice to get in a helicopter and go down to Saigon. I didn't really know what was happening. That's when this Vietnamese general pinned the medal on me. And standing next to me was one of the most famous names in history, George Patton, Jr.⁹
- Harbison: He was receiving recognition from the Vietnamese also?
- Bell: Yes.
- Harbison: What did he do; do you remember?
- Bell: I have no idea what he did. I have tried to get the family to get me a copy of the picture of he and I there together, but I've never been able to get that. They don't answer my letters. I thought they would, but they don't. But General Abrams came out, shook hands with both of us.¹⁰

⁹ George Smith Patton Jr. was a general of the United States Army who commanded the U.S. Seventh Army in the Mediterranean theater of World War II, and the U.S. Third Army in France and Germany after the Allied invasion of Normandy in June 1944. (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/George_S._Patton)

¹⁰ Creighton Williams Abrams Jr. was a United States Army general who commanded military operations in the Vietnam War from 1968 to 1972, which saw United States troop strength in South Vietnam reduced from a

Harbison: Did he ask what you did?

Bell: No. He talked to me, said, "Good to see you again Bell," and that kind of thing. He hadn't shaved, so he'd apparently been pretty busy at the time. I don't think he cared whether he shaved for three or four days or not. But they pinned the medals on us, and I got a copy of the order, all in Vietnamese.

I didn't know what it said. I've had it translated since then, on one of them. I never could get the second one translated. I know I've got a copy of the translation of the one medal for the gallantry cross, but I don't know where the translation is now.¹¹ If you need a copy of it or want a copy, my son has one, I'm sure.

Harbison: Okay. That's an interesting story. Did the Vietnamese regularly recognize U.S. military personnel for valor?

Bell: Yes, yes.

Harbison: They were very appreciative and wanted to...?

Bell: We had a Vietnamese lieutenant assigned to us as liaison. He's the one that coordinated all this, I found out later. I told him I had the two medals pinned on me, and I told him, I said, "I want two more," I said, "one for each of my sons." They went and got me two more.

Harbison: You had another thing that happened when you were in Vietnam, where you captured a Viet Cong outside the base.

Bell: Yeah. You know, we speak of terrorists nowadays. One of the biggest terrors we had over there was somebody infiltrating your base camp and dropping off satchel charges, so I aggressively worked against that.¹²

Not of my making, but before I got there, they had built large bunkers all the way around. They had machine guns and everything for defense of the base. I actively promoted keeping those things going and keeping a soldier in all of them all of the time. One of them, we didn't worry about him falling asleep because there was a cobra living in the sandbags with him. In front of each one of these bunkers would have been a line of mines and other

peak of 543,000 to 49,000. He was then chief of staff of the United States Army from 1972 until his death. (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Creighton_Abrams)

¹¹ The Republic of Vietnam Gallantry Cross, also known as the Vietnamese Gallantry Cross or Vietnam Cross of Gallantry, is a military decoration of the former Government of South Vietnam. The medal was awarded to military personnel, civilians, and Armed Forces units and organizations in recognition of deeds of valor or heroic conduct while in combat with the enemy.

([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gallantry_Cross_\(South_Vietnam\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gallantry_Cross_(South_Vietnam)))

¹² A satchel charge is a demolition device, primarily intended for combat, whose primary components are a charge of dynamite or a more potent explosive such as C-4 plastic explosive, a carrying device functionally similar to a satchel or messenger bag, and a triggering mechanism; the term covers both improvised and formally designed devices.

(https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Satchel_charge#:~:text=A%20satchel%20charge%20is%20a,term%20covers%20both%20improvised%20and)

defensive positions, but I had an active patrol. This is the point of the story... I'm getting back to my point.

I had a sergeant and seventeen soldiers that patrolled the perimeter all the time, looking for evidence that the Viet Cong were in the area, not all seventeen patrolling at once, maybe the sergeant and one or two. But they found evidence out there that they [the Viet Cong] were marking the area for an attack. You know, bent twigs and stuff. They ran into this Viet Cong lieutenant, who was out there with a map, marking the positions. They shot him, and they brought me the map. The map is now displayed at the 1st Infantry Division Museum, up in Northern Illinois.

The map showed very detailed drawings of every building, every helicopter, everything on the base camp. It had my hut marked as the number five for the attack, I think five. I don't remember the exact number, but it was a low number. (Harbison laughs) Every high-ranking individual had a satchel charge planned for his tent or his trailer or wherever he lived.

Harbison: That wouldn't help you sleep at night, now would it?

Bell: No. I slept about six inches off the mattress. (Harbison laughs) But I refused to take additional coverage. I just relied on my people to keep it safe. They [the Viet Cong] never got through our perimeter. I'm sure that maybe there's other places over there that can say they achieved the same thing, but not very many.

Harbison: So you were in country for how long?

Bell: Just a year.

Harbison: Just one year, and after leaving Vietnam, your next move was to...?

Bell: Memphis, Tennessee. I was sent back there. Allegedly I was to be advisor to the National Guard, but that's not very likely, that they'd send a lieutenant colonel in as advisor to a battalion of National Guard because he would outrank the battalion commander.

Harbison: Sure.

Bell: They usually sent a captain.

Harbison: Why do you think they sent you?

Bell: Well, a problem existed at that time. [Dr.] Martin Luther King was killed, and they wanted somebody in there to coordinate bringing in military troops, in case they needed military law in Memphis.¹³ We set up arrangements to rent vehicles from rental companies. They'd have to have so many vehicles ready

13 Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. was an African American minister and activist who became the most visible spokesperson and leader in the civil rights movement from 1955 until his 1968 assassination in Memphis, TN. (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Martin_Luther_King_Jr.)

for us if this need came up, ride transportation. And they would fly the 1,800 troops in from Fort Hood, Texas.

Harbison: They really thought something bad could happen?

Bell: Yeah, it could, but my assessment, after a year, was we didn't have a big problem with the blacks in Memphis. There wasn't going to be a big riot. One of the threatened riots... [Rev. Ralph] Abernathy was in town, threatening to march on the town, and they'd have a forced march.¹⁴

He met with the city officials and said, okay, he'd make an agreement. He wouldn't march, but they'd have to have a bus down there...They'd start the march, [the city] would have to have the bus come down and arrest him and thirty others and put them in jail, and he'd tell the rest of the people to go on back home, a contrived situation.

Harbison: Kind of symbolic.

Bell: Yes. And once he was in jail, they released the other thirty and kept him because he wanted to lose weight. (both laugh)

Harbison: So you stayed in Memphis until you...?

Bell: I stayed in Memphis.

Harbison: What was your relationship like with the National Guard?

Bell: I didn't have a big problem with them. They knew from the start that they couldn't trust me (Harbison laughs). They bugged my phone.

I had a phone call one day at my home from my boss. He said, "I want you to go to a secure phone." So I just had to go to a military place. I went to a defense depot and...

Harbison: U. S. military.

Bell: Yeah.

Harbison: Not National Guard.

Bell: No, right, U. S. military. But he said, "Your phone is bugged."

Harbison: Why did the National Guard not get along with the regular U. S. military?

Bell: They had to meet certain standards. Sometimes your National Guard advisor would let them slough it off and get by without meeting them, and I wouldn't do it. But I had a presidential teletype in my office, where I had immediate communications with the White House, if needed. I never used it; that's how serious the thing was.

¹⁴Ralph David Abernathy Sr. was an American civil rights activist and Baptist minister. He was ordained in the Baptist tradition in 1948. As a leader of the civil rights movement, he was a close friend and mentor of Martin Luther King Jr. (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ralph_Abernathy)

The FBI was in my office quite regularly. One of the FBI agents was in my office one day when the National Guard commander walked in and said that I'd been doing something; I don't know what. But he said, "Just expect that our National Guard people are state troopers and cops and everything, and you're going to get a ticket every place you go."

Harbison: He said that to you?

Bell: Yeah.

Harbison: Wow.

Bell: So the FBI agents... After he left, the FBI says, "Don't worry about it. If you get a ticket, just let me know." I did get a ticket for speeding, not too long after that.

Harbison: Who issued that?

Bell: I believe it was a county cop, but he might have been a guardsman, might not. Maybe [that] had nothing to do with it. But I was in a line of traffic, and they pulled me out. Well, they were prone to pull military people out of a line of traffic. We had the naval base there, and they had problems with the Navy people speeding and so forth. They'd see that Navy sticker, and they'd pull them out and maybe give them a warning ticket or maybe give them a citation.

They pulled me over and gave me a citation. So I was assigned to one court, and the FBI agent said, "Don't go to that court; just show up in another one. I'll get it transferred." He got it transferred to a judge named Churchill. Churchill was strong pro-military, and when I walked in the courtroom...

Harbison: Did you have your uniform on?

Bell: Yeah. I walked in the courtroom, and Judge Churchill looked at me, and he said, "Colonel Bell, good to see you. Your appearance is your fine. Be gone." (both laugh)

Harbison: That was nice of him. So you retired then in 1971.

Bell: In 1971, I had twenty years in, but I decided there wasn't going to be any problem in Memphis. So I got in my car, and I drove to the Pentagon. I said "What's in the future for me?" I said, "I'd prefer another trip to Vietnam." My thinking was that another good tour in a combat zone would embellish my record.

They told me that I couldn't go back to Vietnam because there was 160 colonels ahead of me, wanting to go. And I said, "Well, what's the prospects?" He said, "You can go to Hawaii, Germany or Alaska." I said, "Can I get a command?" He said, "No." He said, "You're going to get a desk job," and I said, "Well, I quit."

Harbison: So you retired.

- Bell: Yeah, I retired and went into optometry school.
- Harbison: So, you went into optometry school and graduated from Southern College [of Optometry]?
- Bell: In '74.
- Harbison: In 1974. When we talked earlier, you told me you practiced in Tennessee, and then you sold your practice there and returned to Calhoun County, which is where we are right now, in Batchtown in Calhoun County. What year did you come back to Calhoun County?
- Bell: My memory's kind of foggy, but I think it was '82. I opened up a practice in Hardin, Illinois. A few years later I opened up a practice in Jerseyville, Illinois, took over a practice for a doctor that had an aneurysm and bought his practice out. Then I built a new building, maybe a year later, in Jerseyville. Then I put in for a grant to provide eye care in the next county north, Green County, because they had no optometrist, and it's a low-income county. [I] got the grant approved, \$100,000 to put an office in White Hall.
- Harbison: So you had offices in Hardin...?
- Bell: Hardin, Jerseyville and then White Hall. Well, I got it approved through all the Lions Clubs to get the \$100,000, but on the very last step of the approval, one individual objected to it.¹⁵ He didn't want his Lions Club participating. That squelched the whole thing. He was an influential person in White Hall; he was a National Guard or Reserve general.
- Harbison: The National Guard come back to haunt you again.
- Bell: I don't know that it had anything to do with it, but it could very well have had something to do with it. He might have had a strong antipathy to West Pointers or maybe to me. But I didn't know him. He'd made his promotions up through the line as a Reserve general, a reservist. He had a couple of tours. You know, the Reserves provide liaison officers to the Pentagon, and he was one of those people. That enhanced his chances for promotion. And if they keep their nose clean and do all the little things necessary, take the necessary steps, they get promoted.
- Harbison: So you did have an office in White Hall?
- Bell: I had an office in White Hall. When he said that, I said, "Well, I'll tell you what; you've just ended my chances to get the \$100,000." But I said, "I'm going to build an office in White Hall anyway." I went to the bank and borrowed the \$100,000, had the building built, opened an office up there. It was very successful.

¹⁵ Lions Clubs International was founded in Evansville, Indiana on 24 October 1916 by William Perry Woods and subsequently evolved as an international service organization. (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lions_Clubs_International)

Harbison: So you would travel from...You had office hours at certain days.

Bell: I had a girl in each office to...

Harbison: Set things up for you, and then you'd come and do the examinations and do the prescription glasses.

Bell: Yeah.

Harbison: Now, you practiced optometry until what year?

Bell: Probably 2000.

Harbison: And you retired. You told me that the State of Illinois was interfering with you a little bit.

Bell: Well, in 2000 I was diagnosed with prostate cancer, and 2005 was my last practice year.

Harbison: Just ten years ago.

Bell: Yeah.

Harbison: And you're eighty...?

Bell: Eighty-seven, almost eighty-eight now.

Harbison: So you had a long practice.

Bell: Yeah. I enjoyed it, and I could still be practicing if I had kept my nose clean.(laughs)

Harbison: There was a little bit about continuing education, correct?

Bell: Yes. As a result of the prostate cancer, I missed some chances to get continuing education. They wouldn't give me a bye [a pass] on that, the State Board wouldn't give me a bye on it. I had no idea why they wouldn't look at the chance to keep an optometrist in practice.

Harbison: Especially in a rural area.

Bell: Yes, a very needed area. So my license was in jeopardy, and I just kept practicing without a license.

Harbison: Right. They didn't really like that though, did they?

Bell: No. No, they didn't.

Harbison: That's very interesting, but you weren't done helping people here in Calhoun County.

Bell: No.

Harbison: I know from talking to some friends of mine over here and from our first interview, you were involved in some other local projects. Let's just talk very

briefly about the helicopter pads. You thought there was a need for medical helicopters to have access?

Bell: Well, when the flood of '93 came through, it destroyed our medical center, and FEMA [the Federal Emergency Management Agency] came in. To make a long story short, we wound up getting a new building built for a medical center.

I was on the medical center board at that time, so I said, "I want a helicopter pad next to that medical center." They put it in the plans, but they never completed the helicopter pad. They did the earthwork for it, but then the contractor said, "I don't have enough money left to build it." We had lots of money that came in as donations and our own insurance from the flood, so I went to the board. I said, "I want to finish that helicopter pad," and I said, "I need \$25,000." They said, "Go ahead."

I hired a concrete man that had done some work for me over in Jerseyville, had him come over and build it. We built a state-of-the-art helipad that the pilots, when they leave St. Louis, just trigger their transmitter five times, and the lights come on, and it guides them right into it.

Then, after I had the one done, I hit on the idea of trying to get a helipad in every town in the county. So I went back to the board and told them what I wanted to do. This time, I only wanted them to spend about \$15,000 because I was going to get the rest done with volunteers. I put out a thing for each town to provide \$5,000 and a place to put the helipad, and we'd put one in.

To make a long story short, I couldn't get all the things I wanted. I got one in Batchtown by putting the helipad on my own land and getting volunteers from the town to put the concrete in. The helipad was done for about... Well, people donated money to get us up to the \$5,000. I got it all done. It didn't cost me a penny for labor, so I took all the workers out to dinner, with their families, their wives.

Then I got another one built in Brussels, Illinois, the same way. I couldn't get the other towns in the county to come up with the money or the spot to put it. I would have come up with the money if they'd have just come up with the spot.

Harbison: At least there's three then in Calhoun County.

Bell: Yes, and they're well used.

Harbison: They are getting good use; that's great. And you also... In talking to some folks around here, I understand that you're a member of an organization, the Lions Club?

Bell: Yes.

Harbison: The Lions Club helped build the swimming pool in Hardin.

Bell: That was done early in my time back in Calhoun. When I got back here, of course, I joined the Lions Club right away. There was several women that were working, trying to raise money to build a swimming pool in Calhoun County.

Harbison: The one that's here, is that the only one?

Bell: The only one. They were hauling the kids to Lewis and Clark Community College in Godfrey, taking them down there for swimming lessons.

Well, a busload of kids got hit by a logging truck, left kids all over the road. Two of them have permanent injuries. So that got the attention of the state government and our governor at the time, "Big Jim" [Thompson] said, "If you people can raise \$100,000 for your pool, I'll give you \$100,000. If you can raise \$200,000, I'll give you \$200,000." So we had a chance to get a \$400,000 dollar pool.

We went to work on it. Things don't always work out too good. We had to deal with state agencies. They kept putting additional requirements on us to get that money. It wasn't going to be a gift.

Harbison: A lot of hoops to jump through.

Bell: Yeah, a lot of hoops to jump through, a lot of paperwork to get done. We spent \$30,000 trying to comply with their requirements. By that time, we had taken the money we had raised and had pared it down from \$120,000 or \$130,000, down to about \$80,000 and no pool.

Some of these women decided to give up. I got involved at the time. I said "Let's get the Lions Club in there and see if we can't get them to get the pool built." All those women were glad to keep working on it. We got a pool builder who came in. We had somebody that came in to us, and he said, "I'll give you the land to put the pool on."

Harbison: That's a start.

Bell: Yeah, that's a start. Then we got hold of a pool builder. He said, "I'll put you a pool in for \$80,000, but it won't include a fence, and it won't include a pool house, and it won't include a kiddie pool." We said, "Go ahead." He started in on it. He got the pool going, got it almost done.

Somebody mentioned something about Kool-Deck. I'd never heard of [it], but there's a coating you can put on the deck, around a pool, where it never gets hot. We told him, "Go ahead and do that." That was another \$10,000. I said, "Don't tell anybody, though; just do it." (Harbison laughs)

Then he said something about the kiddie pool. We said, "We can't have that kiddie pool not done," so we told him to go ahead and finish the kiddie pool, and don't tell anybody. Then a masonry unit, a company from Godfrey, came to us and said, "I'll build your pool house if you'll have people there to carry the concrete blocks to my masons." So we did.

Harbison: A little sweat equity.

Bell: Yeah, and he built the pool house for us. The Knights of Columbus said they'd put the fence up for us.¹⁶ I don't know how we paid for that fence, but you know, there's a lot of scoundrels work in construction. They may have stolen the whole fence from a construction site and brought it in. (Harbison laughs) I don't know.

Harbison: I would hope the Knights of Columbus wouldn't have done that.

Bell: No. The fence may have been paid for by somebody.

Harbison: Sounds like a real community effort, though.

Bell: Yes. That's a detail that I never tracked down. But we got the pool done. We got it opened, I believe in '87, August of '87. The summer was just about over, but we said, we're going to open it and swim (laughs).

Harbison: Do they teach swimming lessons there?

Bell: Yes. There's swimming lessons taught every year. There's as many as thirty kids or more learn to swim every year.

Harbison: And that's pretty important when you live in Calhoun County, because you have rivers on both sides.

Bell: Yes. And a lot of people have home pools. This pool operates in the red every year, but we manage to find the money to pay it off. It has from thirty to fifty kids in it every day that it's open. Different businesses around the town will provide a free swim for the whole afternoon. We charge those \$100, \$150, whatever they want to pay. Maybe a couple of them will go together and pay seventy-five bucks apiece to get it going, but free swim. And it's open for parties on the weekend and at nights.

Harbison: Gets a lot of use.

Bell: Yes.

Harbison: That's wonderful. I'm going to ask you just a couple more questions. Why did you agree to do this interview?

Bell: I think it's important that it's in the record, and a little bit of it is ego, but not much. I think it's important in the record. Maybe some kids will go up there, and they'll read this, and they'll be a little bit inspired.

Harbison: How do you think your experience, being in the military, changed you and your outlook on life?

¹⁶ The Knights of Columbus is a global Catholic fraternal service order. The organization was founded in 1882 as a mutual benefit society for working-class and immigrant Catholics in the United States. (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Knights_of_Columbus)

Bell: That's a hard question to answer, about what kind of person I'd have been if I hadn't been in the military. I've always been a giver, not a taker. I'm proud of my military service. I'm justly proud of being the only West Pointer that ever went from this county, and I would like very much to get some more kids to go. I talk to them all the time about it. It's a great education, and it doesn't cost anything.

Harbison: It's a good deal there. If you have any good advice or wisdom to pass on to future generations, would you like to impart any of that?

Bell: The thing I would say is get involved in your community, and do something for it. That's the only way we're going to exist. We have too many people today that just want to take everything and will not volunteer to help do these things. If we don't have that, we're going to lose our life, our existence as we have it.

Harbison: Thank you very much, Dr. Bell, for doing this interview.

Bell: Thank you. Thank you for being here.

(end of transcript)