

Interview with Peter Beckwith

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Interviewer: Rozanne Flatt

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- Flatt: This is Rozanne Flatt. This is the eighteenth of November 2009. I'm a volunteer with the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library's *Veterans Remember* Oral History project. I'm in the diocesan office of the Episcopal Church in Springfield, Illinois, and sitting with me across the table is Rear Admiral Peter Hess Beckwith, Chaplain Corps, United States Navy Reserve, (Retired.) Good afternoon, Chaplain.
- Beckwith: Good afternoon.
- Flatt: He has another title, the Right Reverend Peter Hess Beckwith, Episcopal Bishop of Springfield. We've talked about proper address, and we have decided that we will be Peter and Rozanne because it's so much more informal and so much nicer. We're going to talk with him about his life; after we get through with the beginning parts, we'll concentrate on his military service, which was many and varied. He's had two very distinct overlapping careers. Let's start at the beginning, Peter. When and where were you born?
- Beckwith: Battle Creek Michigan, September 8, 1939, eight days after Nazi Germany invaded Poland.
- Flatt: That would be correct.
- Beckwith: Just at the beginning of World War II—what became World War II very quickly.

- Flatt: Very quickly, didn't it? Mm-hmm. That makes you a septuagenarian.
- Beckwith: It does.
- Flatt: Looking forward to being an octogenarian someday, I hope.
- Beckwith: I would, yes.
- Flatt: Okay. Tell me a little about your parents and growing up.
- Beckwith: Wonderful folks. Poor. Each were the first to go to college from their families. My father became an orphan essentially when he was in high school. During the Depression, he put himself through school and supported his half-sister and his grandmother. My mother grew up on a farm outside of Elsie, Michigan. I have wonderful memories as a youth going back to the farm to see Grandma and her brother who ran the farm later in my grandmother's life. But phenomenal folks. Hardship was nothing except a challenge to be overcome.
- Flatt: Of course, not only was this nine days after Hitler overran Poland, but this was also at the end of the Depression. The Depression was still on in the United States.
- Beckwith: Was still on.
- Flatt: So you grew up at a time when times had been hard for quite a while.
- Beckwith: Absolutely, for ten years, the crash being in '29, and my dad graduated from college in '34. He sold magazines to put himself through school, When he graduated, took a job with Kellogg, the cereal people, and had to take a cut in pay, but figured there was much more future in that than in selling magazines. Indeed there was.
- Flatt: Did that turn out to be the case?
- Beckwith: It did. It's interesting. He developed the variety pack. Remember the little boxes?
- Flatt: Sure, yeah.
- Beckwith: You could make a bowl out of them.
- Flatt: They still have them.
- Beckwith: That was his idea. Actually, I don't think you make a bowl out of them anymore.
- Flatt: Maybe not.

Beckwith: But maybe again. And that's a long story. He was a salesman for Kellogg and called on the CCC camps in upper Michigan...

Flatt: That's the Civilian Conservation Corps.

Beckwith: (overlapping) Conservation Corps. And in those days, they had these huge boxes of cereal, something that you would maybe see in Sam's today. They would get spilled, and they'd get stale, and, you know, not everybody liked the same kind. So that's how he came up with the variety pack. It's interesting—his boss took the credit for it and became president of Kellogg, and he went on to Seal-Rite and is credited with developing the half-gallon container. Long story.

Flatt: And good. What about your mother. What was her maiden name?

Beckwith: Hess, my middle name. I was named after her grandfather, Peter Hess.

Flatt: Okay, good. That's always nice, to have those family connections come along, isn't it?

Beckwith: Indeed, indeed. And every bit as focused as my dad, and maybe the power behind the throne, as it were, in lots of ways. She was the only girl, four brothers. Kind of a typical small Michigan farm situation. I would say courageous people, but very principled people.

Flatt: Were they church people as well?

Beckwith: Very much so. My earliest memories are going to church wherever we happened to be. They became Episcopalians when they got married and set up housekeeping in Marshall, Michigan. They went to the various churches—my dad had been a Baptist, I think, and my mother was Church of Christ—and they went to the Episcopal Church and liked it, and end of story. I was baptized there when I was born, as was my brother.

Flatt: Or “beginning of story” maybe is a better way to say it. (laughs)

Beckwith: Yeah, beginning. Yeah, I suppose, yeah. My dad had a wonderful voice. He had looked at professional singing at one point—music career—and his mother squashed that when he was a young teen and he sang in the choir. We've got lots of pictures of those days.

Flatt: That's wonderful.

Beckwith: My brother and I were acolytes; actually, before we were acolytes we sang in the choir with my dad.

Flatt: Okay, so you are a long-time, lifetime, I guess, you'd say...

- Beckwith: Cradle Episcopalian, as they say.
- Flatt: Did you have any siblings?
- Beckwith: Two brothers. I have two brothers Robert Junior, my older brother, was killed in nineteen eighty...five or seven. It was 1987. And a younger brother, Jon, who lives in Hillsdale, Michigan and took over the family business, which is ice cream and packaging and stuff like that.
- Flatt: Okay, very good. Well, it was the end of the Depression and leading into World War II. Of course, you were pretty young, but do you remember hearing your folks talk about World War II events as you grew up?
- Beckwith: We moved from Marshall, which I do not recall, to Detroit. I recall the wardens¹ coming to the door telling us to turn the lights down or pull the shades. And then, toward the end of the war, moved to Elsie, to the farm, for fear of air raids.
- Flatt: Interesting. You know, I remember that air raid warden stuff, too. At the time, perhaps I wasn't real familiar with just what distances of geography meant. You know, here we were (laughs) in the heart of America. But I think it gave people a sense that they were doing something that they should be doing. If they weren't involved in the war effort, then by golly, we better do the right thing wherever we were—when I look back on it now. Do you have that same feeling? Because I don't think we were really worried about being bombed.
- Beckwith: Well, probably not any more than the '50s, when we had to duck under the desks. It was practice in case—
- Flatt: But, I mean, the bombers didn't have the kind of range to come from say, the East...
- Beckwith: They did not.
- Flatt: ...to get to the Midwest. I mean, we know the submarines got to the East coast.
- Beckwith: Right, and West Coast. But yeah, I think it was more practice than it was out of an actual fear, although we did move to the country, away from what would have been a major target, because they were making tanks and all the stuff.
- Flatt: Sure. Detroit was a major manufacturing area.
- Beckwith: Yeah, absolutely. B-17s over at Ypsilanti. Then we moved when I was four, so that would have been in about spring of '44. We moved to Columbus,

¹ Volunteer Air Raid Wardens were recruited all over the country to patrol their neighborhoods to make sure there were no lights to guide potential enemy bombers.

Ohio—actually, to Worthington—and I essentially grew up there, graduated from high school there and then went back to Michigan to school. Never gave up my loyalty to Michigan.

Flatt: (laughs) Okay. Worthington is kind of a north suburb of Columbus, isn't it?

Beckwith: It is.

Flatt: Okay. What were you interested in, in high school?

Beckwith: Oh, sports mainly.

Flatt: What were your sports interests?

Beckwith: Anything that was in season: baseball, track, football. I got into wrestling in high school. That was not a major sport at all, but it came to the high school when I was in high school. It was kind of a good match for me.

Flatt: Good. You mean physically?

Beckwith: Physically, and the whole idea of that. I was the younger brother for seven years and then the middle brother for the rest of the time, and I was pretty much the banty rooster in the family as well as the neighborhood, I think.

Flatt: And probably did a little wrestling around among the boys, too.

Beckwith: Did a lot of wrestling around, yeah. (Flatt laughs) Yeah, and some more serious than others.

Flatt: (laughs) Okay. Did you do any hunting?

Beckwith: I actually got into hunting later. When I was in Jackson, Michigan I got the pheasant-hunting fever, though it was very limited—the season being only a matter of weeks, maybe four—I would go with my barber. We would go out at four a.m. in the morning and see if we could find any birds. I continued that while I was in Michigan, but when we moved back to Ohio in '78, I don't think I've shot the gun since.

Flatt: I noticed in your résumé that you were qualified as expert in pistol and rifle.

Beckwith: That was a result of my service with the Marine Corps.

Flatt: Okay, well, we'll get to that a little bit later, then. All right, good. I wondered where that was going to come in; that's why I thought of hunting. Backing up just a minute, you talked about covering up the windows, blackening the windows for the potential air raids. Do you remember anything else about the war, about rationing, victory gardens, any of that stuff?

Beckwith: I do, but when we were in Worthington. Saving grease, saving cans, crushing the cans, and had a victory garden. I remember walking with my mother, because we had one car. My dad was a traveling salesman, and it was very difficult to get everything from gasoline to tires.

Flatt: Especially gas and tires, yeah.

Beckwith: We would walk what seemed like a long, long ways to the market with the rationing stamps for sugar and meat; you would go on days when the shipments would arrive, and there'd be a line. We'd drag a wagon. Come to find out it was probably about four or five blocks max—and short neighborhood blocks, not city blocks—but it seemed like a long ways for a little boy.

Flatt: I'm sure it did, (laughs) especially a banty rooster. (laughs)

Beckwith: Right after the war, I remember standing in line at the local gas station—we would ride our bicycles down—when the candy would come in.

Flatt: Oh, well, it didn't seem like such a long trip then, did it?

Beckwith: No, and it was about the same distance, but on a bicycle. Yeah, those were the good old days. But it was interesting because you'd be in line, and then when you got to the counter, you could pick what was left. It wasn't as if... I mean, going to the store now and you get a gazillion choices; it wasn't like that. It was this kind of penny candy or that kind of penny candy, and it would change every week, what was available.

Flatt: Well, a lot of it was going over for the troops.

Beckwith: Well, this was after the war.

Flatt: Oh, okay.

Beckwith: This would have been after the war. This would have been probably '46, '47. But there were still shortages.

Flatt: Okay. Well, let's see. You got out of high school in...?

Beckwith: Fifty-seven.

Flatt: Fifty-seven, okay. You did a lot of sports, as you say, per season. Were you still involved in church activities?

Beckwith: I was.

Flatt: Singing in the choir and that sort of thing?

- Beckwith: I was an acolyte in high school with my brother, **every Sunday**. Those were great days.
- Flatt: By the time you graduated, did you have any inklings of a career in the religious order?
- Beckwith: I had. I had felt called from an early time, probably before high school, and then that just kind of continued to develop. After college, I recall applying to seminary and to the Michigan State Police, thinking at that time I could do better as a policeman than I could as a priest. I'm sure that a lot of folks who knew me at that time thought that would be appropriate. I wasn't accepted in the state police because I had not completed military duty. They even spelled my name wrong, which was kind of disconcerting.
- Flatt: Well, that's funny, because it's not that difficult a name.
- Beckwith: No, and it was typed, but it was a clear message. At the same time I got accepted to seminary, and I thought, This is strange. It just continued to be on that kind of track as I tested my vocation, as they say, and it was kind of a testing of God.
- Flatt: He does that to all of us.
- Beckwith: It's strange (laughs) that it worked out this way.
- Flatt: From high school, you went right, I presume, the following fall to Hillsdale College in Michigan, correct?
- Beckwith: I did. I did.
- Flatt: Was it after Hillsdale that you were turned down by the police, or before?
- Beckwith: Right. I graduated in three and a half years. I took—probably picked that up from my folks—took a heavy schedule every year and so was able to graduate in three and a half years, and did essentially the same thing in seminary. Seminary is a three-year program, and my final semester, I only needed one class; I only needed two credits to graduate. I recall going in to my advisor, who is a good friend today—is now the retired bishop of South Carolina, a man by the name of FitzSimons Allison—and he said, “Beckwith, if you think you're going to skate on one course, you're nuts.” And I said, “Well, sir, whatever you think is appropriate.” He said, “You have to take **two** courses.” So I had two classes in the morning on Tuesdays and Thursdays, so that last semester I had long weekends, Friday through Monday, and I would often would go up to DePauw in Greencastle, Indiana, to see Melinda, now my wife.
- Flatt: Oh, so that one would note what was coming along for quite a while.

- Beckwith: Well, it was cooking since the summer before. Her brother and I were fraternity brothers at Hillsdale, and met her.
- Flatt: And that was Delta Tau Delta, right?
- Beckwith: Delta Tau Delta, right. Yeah.
- Flatt: Well, back up a little bit to high school, because we sort of jumped there. You were very much involved in sports there, too, weren't you?
- Beckwith: I was. My dad was an athlete, my mother was an athlete, and it just kind of came natural. I'm not sure I was all that good, but again, wrestling was the sport that was kind of my focus.
- Flatt: At Hillsdale College then, things had been starting earlier to heat up in Vietnam, after the French moved out. I'm just trying to set a little historical background, when you went to—
- Beckwith: No, that didn't happen until it was the late '50s, but it was really in the '60s when we got involved, and it was—
- Flatt: Right, but—
- Beckwith: —the middle sixties more than the late fifties—
- Flatt: That's right, but it was—
- Beckwith: —because I went to college in '57.
- Flatt: I was just trying to, since people a hundred years from now, we hope, will be listening to this—
- Beckwith: Good heavens.
- Flatt: Things were sort of in the background, though. Anyway, back to the sports, you're shorting yourself. I think you got some distinctions. You were Captain of the wrestling team, weren't you?
- Beckwith: I was—twice, as a matter of fact—but that maybe talks in terms of the lack of (laughs) other folks more than it talks about me. It was a great honor, and I enjoyed it very much.
- Flatt: And many years later, they honored you, I understand.
- Beckwith: Not for wrestling, but for football, but that was because I was on a championship team. And have wonderful friends to this day, a former roommate who was Little All-American. Yeah, we had a pretty good football team.

Flatt: You had fraternity brothers at Delta Tau Delta and are still active with them in some way?

Beckwith: I am, I am. I'm Northern Division Vice President, which means I have responsibility for two chapters in Illinois Beta Upsilon at U of I and Zeta Rho at EIU, Eastern Illinois University. And I'm also chapter advisor at Hillsdale for Kappa chapter, which is a fluke, as it were, because I'm a long ways away. It's like almost six hours; it's a good five and a half hours.

Flatt: Well, Hillsdale, for our audience here, is just north of the Indiana border and about halfway east and west in Michigan, if I recall.

Beckwith: Right. Indiana-Ohio border. Hillsdale County is the first county you would go into when you go out of Bryan, Ohio. It's about 370 miles from here. And the reason—that's a long story in itself—but the chapter was closed, well, six, seven years ago, and when it was restarted they had to have a chapter advisor; I was part of the Alumni Advisory Team, and nobody else wanted to do it, (Flatt laughs) and I said, I'll do it. I get a lot of really good help from folks, and I'm looking to push all that stuff off on somebody else now.

Flatt: Yeah, I think you have enough on your plate these days, don't you? But now, that was not a religious advisory kind of thing.

Beckwith: No.

Flatt: It's strictly administrative and oversight for the chapter, I presume.

Beckwith: Right, right. But there's a spiritual aspect to it, of course, as there is to everything.

Flatt: Well, sure, but I mean that's not the primary reason you were the person; it was because you were capable—

Beckwith: No, exactly. Not, not—

Flatt: —and willing—

Beckwith: Yeah, it didn't have any—

Flatt: —and you were out of the room when you were voted on. (laughter)

Beckwith: Didn't have anything to do with being a bishop or a retired Rear Admiral. Yeah.

Flatt: Okay. Well, you went right on to graduate studies. Let's talk about that a little bit.

Beckwith: I did. Well, I—

- Flatt: But I should say what degree—
- Beckwith: That next fall.
- Flatt: —and when did you graduate? What was your degree?
- Beckwith: Sixty-four. In those days, it was a Bachelor of Divinity—
- Flatt: I think you graduated in '61 from Hillsdale.
- Beckwith: Right, correct.
- Flatt: I'm sorry, I'm talking about Hillsdale.
- Beckwith: Oh, Hillsdale.
- Flatt: Yeah. Hillsdale, you graduated in '61, correct?
- Beckwith: Graduated in '61 with a Bachelor of Arts degree, major in Philosophy and Religion and minors in—I think I had three minors—Psychology, English, and History. I graduated in January. I was a wholesale milkman in Columbus, Ohio, in the interim between college and seminary. I went off to seminary in August of '61 at the University of the South, Sewanee, Tennessee, School of Theology, otherwise known in those days as Saint Luke's Hall because the building in which the seminary was housed was Saint Luke's Hall.
- Flatt: Okay. (laughs) Well, that makes sense. That's kind of the way they do it at Oxford, isn't it?
- Beckwith: Yeah, they do. They do, yeah.
- Flatt: Okay. And speaking of Oxford, you mention in your résumé some summer classes at Oxford. Were they in this time period, or were they later on?
- Beckwith: No, much later.
- Flatt: Okay, well, we'll get to those, because we'd like to hear more about that.
- Beckwith: In '98 and '07. And I recommend it.
- Flatt: Oh, wonderful place.
- Beckwith: Unbelievable.
- Flatt: Well, let's take that when we get to it. So you got your Master's in Divinity from—
- Beckwith: Actually, it was a Bachelor when I graduated, and then it was upgraded sometime later. I remember getting this manila envelope, that was, oh, maybe

five by seven, and there was a letter that said that it had been upgraded, and there was a little certificate that said it had been upgraded, and if you wanted a sheepskin, you could send them \$25 and they'd send it to you. (Flatt laughs) Well, I just pasted that on the back of mine.

Flatt: (laughs) That'll do.

Beckwith: I earned a Bachelor; a Bachelor is fine. In the meantime, I had gotten a Master of Sacred Theology degree, and I didn't feel like there was any need to put anything else on the wall.

Flatt: The important place was in the head, where you needed it for fast recall, right?

Beckwith: Exactly.

Flatt: Okay. Well, just, again, a little background. In '64, when you graduated from the University of the South, that was the year when Congress passed a resolution authorizing the President to undertake war if that should be necessary. I don't think that was quite the wording, but that was the gist of it. So that's background, building up, since we're going to be talking about your military background. There's got to be a reason for things, usually. Okay, so you jumped right from the University of the South into the priesthood.

Beckwith: Well, I was ordained a deacon and was a deacon for a little over six months, which was the custom in those days unless there was some kind of academic issue. I was ordained Deacon on the twenty-ninth of June—that's the Feast of Saint Peter and Saint Paul—in Detroit, Michigan, at the cathedral there. Then I was ordained a priest on the sixth of January, the Feast of the Epiphany, in Plymouth, Michigan, where I was the Assistant Rector at St. John's, Plymouth.

Flatt: Okay. Now, what's the difference between a deacon and a priest, in terms of duties and what you actually did and contributed and so forth.

Beckwith: It's modeled after the scriptural model, which deacons are more oriented toward service, specifically outreach—feeding the poor, caring for orphans and widows, that kind of thing. They cannot give the blessing of the church; they cannot pronounce... (pause)

Flatt: Marriages, that sort of thing?

Beckwith: Well, they could marry, but they couldn't give the blessing of the church, and so it would, in my view, be inappropriate that they would be the only person there. They could participate in it. In this diocese, a deacon has to have a priest present to give the blessing of the church. But they couldn't pronounce absolution after confession, those kinds of things. They could lead services; they preach. In those days, they could not consecrate—you still can't—consecrate the elements in Holy Communion. And they had, then, what they

call—as they do now—a Deacon’s Mass or the Mass of the Pre-sanctified, where the deacon would preside and the elements were already consecrated. But the person I worked for didn’t think it was appropriate, so I didn’t do it.

Flatt: Okay. Whatever works.

Beckwith: He was the boss; whatever he said.

Flatt: That’s right. Okay, so you mentioned going on to St. John’s in Plymouth, Michigan, which is near Detroit, isn’t it?

Beckwith: It’s a suburb northwest of Detroit, not too awfully far from Ann Arbor.

Flatt: And you were ordained a priest at that time, is that correct?

Beckwith: I was, I was.

Flatt: So now you could do all those things.

Beckwith: Right.

Flatt: All right. Something else happened that year, 1965.

Beckwith: Well, that’s correct. I was ordained priest on the sixth, and I was married to Melinda on the tenth of July that same year.

Flatt: Very good.

Beckwith: Yeah.

Flatt: Still married.

Beckwith: Those were busy days. Still married.

Flatt: That’s pretty good.

Beckwith: Couldn’t imagine anything other than that.

Flatt: That’s the way it’s supposed to be.

Beckwith: Supposed to be.

Flatt: Absolutely. What was Melinda’s maiden name?

Beckwith: Foulke. And that’s interesting. For years, I’d thought that was German, and I think she did, too, and then come to find out it’s Welsh.

Flatt: Oh. (laughs)

Beckwith: We ran across a tomb in 1974. We were in Newport, Rhode Island with the Navy, and at Trinity Church—Trinity Newport—I think it's Trinity Church. Maybe it's Christ Church. I think it's Trinity Church—founded in 1699 or something. There was a tombstone, something Foulke, in the graveyard, dated about the revolution. And I'm thinking, well, this had to be a mercenary. Nobody corrected me. And then come to find out it was Welsh. (laughs) And that would fit, because the Welch would have been Anglican, Episcopalian.

Flatt: Sure. Now, once you became a priest, according to your résumé, you had assistantships there and then on at St. Paul's in Jackson, Michigan. What was the difference between being an assistant and being the full guy, the top guy? I presume it meant there was somebody—it was a big enough parish that it required...

Beckwith: Right. It was unusual that you would go to do two different assistantships, I think. Most people out of seminary went right to a parish, either as the vicar, which meant it was a mission, or to a small parish as rector. It was really important for me to have those assistantships and to see how these two people operated very differently, and yet very effectively, in their own way.

Flatt: Good learning experience, then.

Beckwith: Excellent. Total of six years. I was two years in the first place and four years in the second place. Interestingly enough, I think, you learn as much how not to do it as how to do it, because it's a lot easier to see somebody else's mistakes than your own. Those were very helpful years for me.

Flatt: That seems to be pretty true in life, if you think about it, whatever your profession or pursuit.

Beckwith: Sure, sure.

Flatt: You have the opportunity to learn from others. Beckwith: And those were great years, because as an assistant, you didn't have to worry about the administrative duties; you could just focus on the **ministry**. Not that the administrative duties are not ministry—they are—but it's different. I could just deal with people, and mainly youth groups in both places. The buck stopped at his desk, and the problems I caused, he could put the oil on. (Flatt laughs) And those were good years. When I went off to Saginaw, Michigan in November of 1970, it was with fear and trembling because, you know, now the mantle was resting on my shoulders.

Flatt: You didn't have anybody to give you WD-40, huh? (laughs)

Beckwith: Exactly. But I've had an amazing career for an Episcopalian: I've never served in a congregation as the only clergyperson. Even at St. Matthew's, Saginaw, which in those days was considered a small congregation—we worshipped between 150 and 250 people a week—that would be considered a

large congregation today in the Episcopal Church in most every place. There was a deacon, what we called a perpetual deacon or a vocational deacon, was not going to be ordained priest, and he was the county engineer—the road commissioner, in other parlance. He was a great help. He was an old guy; he was probably in his mid-forties. (Flatt laughs) I say that facetiously now. But I was thirty. He had a wonderful knack of giving me guidance in a way that was not threatening.

Flatt: He knew everybody in the—

Beckwith: We got along famously. He's now deceased, but what a marvelous man he was. I've got a wonderful story about him. I don't know if you want to hear it, but—

Flatt: Sure.

Beckwith: His name was Ely. Oh, mercy, what was his first name? But we went to a diocesan convention down in Detroit, Michigan. He had gone out that evening with the rest of our parish delegation to—this was after dinner—probably to have a drink or two—and came back and didn't want to wake me up—we were in the same room—didn't want to wake me up, didn't turn the light on. In the morning (laughs) when we get up... I guess I had gotten up a little earlier and had gone to bed substantially earlier than he had. When he had gotten into bed, he had gotten under the fitted sheet.

Flatt: (laughs) That's not easy to do.

Beckwith: No. So it was on top of his neck but around his shoulders. We had a great laugh about that, because he said, "Geez, all night long, I was dreaming somebody was trying to choke me." (laughter) And that was kind of our secret. We may have told some people, but that was a hilarious night.

Flatt: That's a good one. Well, let that be a lesson, huh? (laughs) Beckwith:
Yeah, turn the light on. (laughs)

Flatt: Know thy limits.

Beckwith: Yeah, that too.

Flatt: Again, a little bit of background. The Vietnam thing, as you pointed out, had come about, and in 1970—and I don't know whether it was while you were still at Jackson, because I don't have the months, or whether it was after you moved to Saginaw, but the Kent State uproar happened.

Beckwith: Yeah, I was still in Jackson.

Flatt: Again, for people a hundred years from now—there were big student protests against the military at the school and against the whole war business—mostly anti-war. The National Guard was called in, by the President, I suppose...

Beckwith: Governor, probably.

Flatt: And some students were shot...

Beckwith: They were.

Flatt: ...and this set off a tinderbox.

Beckwith: Yeah, it didn't help things, but I think, you know, the country was fed up with it, and should be a lesson. I'm not sure we've learned it. We learned it for a while, but currently in Afghanistan, I'd fear the lesson's been lost on the President and his advisors. War's a terrible thing. Anybody who has had any experience with it at all, either first- or second-hand, knows that.

Flatt: Or who's even read about it.

Beckwith: Exactly.

Flatt: I mean, how can you be in favor of war.

Beckwith: Right. As we were talking about earlier, there's a wonderful series on the History Channel about World War II in HD, high definition. One of the themes over and over is that war is hell, and if you're going to commit the best and the brightest, which the military folks are—they're the fit folks—it runs contrary to natural selection. You kill off the strong and the young and the people who are most able, and the people who are least able stay behind and procreate. So it's just the opposite of what nature would have in mind, I would think.

If you're going to commit these people, you better be in it to win, or get out. Let's not have any of this nonsense that we had in Vietnam and we had in Somalia under President Clinton. If you recall that conflict, the military had requested C-130 gunships, and that whole slaughter of U.S. military could have been avoided if they had allowed it, but they were afraid that there would be collateral damage that would be unacceptable. And the reality, as I understand it, in that portion of the city there were no good guys; they were all bad guys. Maybe one of the lessons we all need to learn is if you hang around with bad guys, you suffer what bad guys suffer.

To have Washington, DC run anything—**anything**—is probably a formula for failure. If you've got these people who have studied warfare, let them do their job. I've got lots of stories about that. President Johnson called the father of the Commandant of the Marine Corps, for whom I had worked, into his office and asked him what it would take to win in Vietnam.

Lieutenant General Victor Krulak told him, and Johnson fired him, because it wasn't the—

Flatt: It wasn't what he wanted to hear.

Beckwith: It wasn't what he wanted him to hear. As a result, we paid a huge price: ten years and fifty thousand-plus lives sacrificed, for what? People are making the comparison with Iraq and Afghanistan now, but there's a difference, a **huge** difference. Those folks aren't content to just play their nasty games in their countries.

Flatt: That's right.

Beckwith: Anyway, a little sermon there. I apologize for that.

Flatt: No apology needed. I think there are many people who agree with you on that.

Beckwith: Kent State was a tragedy. Probably showed lack of training more than anything else on the part of the military. They obviously felt threatened. I think I remember reading something where the first round was perhaps a mistaken discharge, and they just opened fire at that point because they thought they were maybe being fired on. I don't know. But I do recall the country being very divided, people saying, Indeed, what a tragedy it was, and it shouldn't have ever happened;—and of course it shouldn't have. Other people saying, They deserved what they got. The second sentiment—no question in my mind—is not appropriate. It would seem to me that the government's responsible for that, allowing it to get to that place where that kind of tragedy happens. If we'd have been responsible in Vietnam and allowed the military to do their job without saying, Well, you **can't** cross this border, and you **can't** do that, it would have been over a long time before.

Flatt: Well, that whole Vietnam thing was really a tragedy for our country as well as for all the people there who suffered, I think. In Korea, at least, I've had it expressed by so many veterans whose interviews I've either done or read, that they ended up feeling that we at least stopped the communists, even though we came to—and at this day and age we are still at—a standstill. There's never been an actual declaration of peace. But the men who fought in that war believe that—even though there were differences of opinion about MacArthur and Truman and all that—that at least we stopped the communists. And then, of course, you look at how South Korea developed so rapidly and so well after the war, and how the North Koreans are starving their people to run the kind of militaristic country they do. So, well, now I got my lecture in. (laughs)

Beckwith: Yeah. There's a thesis that says Vietnam would have been a much greater tragedy if it hadn't been for the Reagan years, in which the Soviet Union—which was the foundation stones for worldwide communism—was essentially defeated. If they hadn't been defeated, if we had continued in something like we saw in the [President Jimmy] Carter years...

Flatt: Mollifying everyone.

Beckwith: Right, ...giving away the Panama Canal and numerous other things. Then the thing that galls me is, this poor person then feels it's appropriate to criticize other presidents. It's absolutely amazing. What a—he should continue to farm his peanuts.²

Flatt: Or build some houses for poor people.³

Beckwith: Yeah, do something constructive for change.

Flatt: Bless him for doing that, but other than that...

Beckwith: Yeah. George Bush by the media was said to be the worst president in the history of the country. Those folks aren't very aware of history, it seems to me. But in my lifespan, I think without question, Carter was the worst up until now, perhaps, and thankfully only had four years. For him to be so bold as to assess other people's presidency just seems out of character. Flatt: Well, not only that, but it had been the custom for presidents to retire and stay out of it.

Beckwith: Absolutely, absolutely.

Flatt: They're not privy to all the intelligence and the daily briefings and all of that.

Beckwith: It is **bad form** to criticize your successors. It's bad form, and I don't care who you are. A bishop criticizing successors doesn't make any sense **either**.

But without the Reagan years and those principles that brought the Soviet Union down, Southeast Asia could easily be all communist now, where it isn't. And as a matter of fact, Vietnam is pretty capitalistic. But anyway, that's a thesis, and I think there's merit to it.

Flatt: Well, I brought that up because 1970 was the year when you moved from Jackson to Saginaw, and at that point—well, that was when Kent State happened. But after you got to Saginaw in September of 1972, you received a direct commission as a lieutenant junior grade in the Chaplain Corps of the U.S. Naval Reserve. What brought that about?

Beckwith: I'll try to keep it short. When I was in seminary, I could not see myself as a parish priest. The requirement in the Episcopal Church to be a military chaplain was that you had to have two years' experience in a parish ministry—and I think that's a good requirement. When I got to the parish, I just fell in love with it.

² Jimmy Carter was originally a peanut farmer in Georgia.

³ Following his presidency, Carter became a major supporter of Habitat for Humanity, a charitable organization which built basic homes, or rehabilitated ones, for people who could not afford them. Recipients were expected to do a considerable amount of volunteer work for Habitat, and most of the workers were community volunteers.

Flatt: Did you surprise yourself?

Beckwith: In retrospect I'm very surprised, because I just couldn't see myself functioning in that, as I had envisioned it, in that role. But how I had envisioned it was not like the role at all.

Flatt: That's interesting.

Beckwith: You know, priests are human beings—

Flatt: Having grown up as a parishioner, you know. (laughs)

Beckwith: Yeah, but still, you know, priests are human beings, and when you're a layperson, you sometimes think that clergy aren't, they're above it all; they've been to the angel factory and they've gotten changed. And of course that's not true. Hopefully they've learned some important things and their life is oriented in a way that God can use it much more efficiently than otherwise, but no, human beings, nonetheless. I met a friend who had been in Plymouth who was in the Navy Reserve chaplain program, too. He was a captain at the time, and I think I was probably a commander or lieutenant commander. He told me that we had talked about that in Plymouth, and I have no recollection of it. When I was in Jackson—that was 1966 to 1970, when Vietnam was heating up—I was in Rotary, and I heard a Navy chaplain—they had a Navy chaplain come from Detroit and talk about his ministry and the Vietnam War. And as a result from that, I invited him to come and talk to our youth group; he came back and did that. That was probably right after the Gulf of Tonkin. I believe if he'd have said to me, "You know, we need chaplains," I probably would have gone active duty at that point, but he never did. I can't help but see God's hand in that, because it would have turned out very much different.

And so I go off to Saginaw, and in 1971, a parishioner who was also a Navy recruiter came in my office and had told me that they were losing their chaplain at the Reserve center and wondered if I had ever thought about it. I told him I had. I had been chaplain of the fire department in Jackson, and that was a wonderful experience, as well as being chaplain to Episcopal inmates at Southern Michigan State Prison for those four years. So I had some kind of understanding, limited as it was, of a chaplain's duties. I told him I was interested in it; he said that he would bring the papers by in the morning, and that was fine with me. He got to the door, and he turned around and he said, "You're the easiest guy I ever recruited." It **didn't take two minutes**. It wasn't two minutes, and it was the best thing that... Well, it was one of the greatest things that ever happened to me. I wouldn't want to necessarily say it was the best, but it—

Flatt: It was a very significant moment in your life.

Beckwith: Yeah, exactly. It took over a year to process.

Flatt: My goodness.

Beckwith: Yes. Not because of the United States Navy but because of the Episcopal Church. The Episcopal Church at its highest levels, then as now, were involved in what they thought was really important assessment of what was appropriate. What they were reassessing was, "Should we even have chaplains at all? Because, of course, the military is so apt to be evil and be baby-killers," et cetera, et cetera.

Flatt: Oh my goodness.

Beckwith: They did decide that they would have chaplains, and I was maybe the first batch. That was in September of 1972, so it was right at the turn-down of the Vietnam War. It became immediately obvious to me that because it was the turn-down... There were 1500 chaplains on active duty, and we were told that we were welcome to the program, but don't expect to go active duty because they were oversubscribed. And so I just settled in for the best of two worlds. And three years later, 1975, I received a phone call from the chief of chaplains' office asking me if I wanted to go active duty. It was the **hardest decision** I ever made in my life. **Hardest decision** I ever made in my life.

Flatt: Why?

Beckwith: Because I **really** felt called to do it but did not do it. I wanted to do it, but there was just something that said that it's not—

Flatt: Not right, right now?

Beckwith: I mean, I have to judge God wasn't behind it. "You've got the best of two worlds. You're old." I mean, in 1972, I was just eight days away from being 33, so my contemporaries were 26—

Flatt: You were the old man.

Beckwith: —as far as grade in rank is concerned. It just couldn't have worked out better. But I said, "Give me a couple of days to pray about it," I called the guy back and said, "I can't do it." My wife was very supportive. We had two children at the time, five and three. I would have been assigned to the USS *Reeves* out of Pearl Harbor, and we would have moved over there. I just said, "I can't do it." I didn't sleep that night. The next day I called them. He was a lieutenant commander, too, a senior lieutenant commander. I was a lieutenant. His name was David White. I said, "I want to do it if there's still a place." He said, "There is, great. Welcome aboard," blah-blah-blah. I didn't sleep that night. I called him up the next day, and I said, "Chaplain White, I can't do it." He said, "Don't call me anymore." (Flatt laughs) Chaplain White became the Chief of Chaplains. Now, in those days, I'm about a commander, and I'm thinking, Ooh-ooh. (laughs) I hope he doesn't remember that. Obviously if he did, he didn't hold it against me; to this day he's very active in military

chaplains' things, not the least of which is the Military Chaplains Association. And we're good friends.

Flatt: (laughs) So perhaps he forgot or chose to forget.

Beckwith: He didn't hold it against me if he didn't forget. He probably forgot all the people he'd talked to. But that was a very, very hard decision. Especially when times got tough in parish ministry, I would think that maybe I'd made a mistake, but I know that I did not. I had the best of two worlds, and had an abundance of temporary active duty, though no extended active duty.

Flatt: Well, let me back you up to one other thing, because someplace in all this activity and going between churches or moving from one church to another and having a family and so forth, you received a Master of Sacred Theology.

Beckwith: I did.

Flatt: And how did you get that done?

Beckwith: Well, it's perhaps an interesting story. I had wanted to go to Nashotah House seminary, which was the Anglo-Catholic seminary of the Episcopal Church.

Flatt: It sounds like an Indian name, by the way.

Beckwith: It is an Indian name, and it was known in its early years in middle 1800s as the Mission, because it was a mission to the Indians. But my bishop said, "You will like it at Sewanee." I did, and Sewanee was a much broader seminary. And so that summer, the summer of '66—married for a year, no children, looking for something to do, on vacation—and for a hundred dollars, you could go for **four** weeks to Nashotah House, which is located in those days in rural southern Wisconsin. Now it's pretty much built up all the way to Milwaukee, but in those days it was out in the country, situated between two lakes, and you got room and tuition for that hundred dollars. In Michigan, a hundred dollars wouldn't get you a week at a place furnished at the lake; we thought that was a good deal. So I went up there with the idea we're just going to have a good time, and this would be a chance to do a little study. And it was wonderful, and I thought, Well, I'll do it next year. I mean, that's a pretty good deal. And did. Then after I got two years in, I thought, Well, you'd be making a mistake not to get the degree. The coursework is supposed to take four years; I did it in three years. And then when I got back in the parish, I didn't ever do the thesis; you had seven years to do the degree, and my hours were running out. So I had to take more classes, and I did do the thesis and got the degree in 1974, about the same time as things were getting interesting in the Navy Reserve Chaplain Corps.

Flatt: You also received a special academic honor from Nashotah House.

Beckwith: I did. Doctor of Humane Letters, and there's a story behind that, but I probably won't talk too much about that. When I was first ordained bishop,

it's not unusual that your seminary—or, in my case, seminaries—give you a Doctor of Divinity. But because I was not against ordination of women to the priesthood, Nashotah House didn't see fit to give me a Doctor of Divinity.

Flatt: Okay. (laughs)

Beckwith: So I kind of wear that as a badge of honor.

Flatt: Yeah. Well, I can especially appreciate that, of course. I learned a new Latin term in researching all of this. I always just heard about an honorary degree, and I learned that the official word is *honoris causa*.

Beckwith: *Honoris...*

Flatt: *Causa*. My Latin teacher would be proud of me.

Beckwith: And I've got, I guess, two honorary degrees, is it?

Flatt: Yes, that's right.

Beckwith: Three honorary degrees. I did get a DD from Sewanee. Before either of my seminaries honored me, my alma mater at Hillsdale gave me a Doctor of... (pause) a P... a doctor of what?

Flatt: Sacred Theology. No, that was Master of Sacred Theology and Doctor of Humane Letters from Nashotah House.

Beckwith: Yeah. Go to the Hillsdale.

Flatt: Let's see, Hillsdale: Ddivinity and Doctor of Theology, *honoris causa*.

Beckwith: Yeah. Which, if you didn't put *honoris causa*, you said—I think they say it a bit differently, but—it could be confused as an earned degree. And I got that fairly early, I think in the late '80s.

Flatt: Good. Okay, well—

Beckwith: Again, I think they [Hillsdale] were probably short of folks; they wanted to stick somebody in there.

Flatt: Oh...

Beckwith: Oh, Beckwith will do. (laughs)

Flatt: Don't be overly modest, Peter; you deserved it.

Beckwith: Now, I don't know that anybody ever deserves it. There are a whole lot of really deserving people.

Flatt: Okay—you worked for it, you did many good things, and it was appropriate. How's that? Is that okay?

Beckwith: Okay.

Flatt: (laughs) All right.

Beckwith: I also got a distinguished alumni award before that from Hillsdale as a result of what they saw in my ministry and various and sundry involvements. So I was honored.

Flatt: Well, it's always nice to be honored.

Beckwith: And later I was inducted into the sports hall of fame, which was kind of interesting, for football.

Flatt: (laughs) Well, you were on the winning team.

Beckwith: Geez. Exactly. It's a team sport.

Flatt: What, state-winning team, wasn't it?

Beckwith: It's a team sport.

Flatt: There you go. Okay. Yes, but a chain is only as strong as its weakest link.

Beckwith: Exactly. Well, in that case, we'd have been really weak. (laughter)

Flatt: Okay. So now let's go back to your commission as a lieutenant JG. Did you have to go through any Navy training?...

Beckwith: Nope. That's why—nope.

Flat: ...boot camp—type of thing, military terminology, protocol, ranks, any of that stuff?

Beckwith: Nope, nope. That's why they call it direct commission.

Flatt: (simultaneously) Direct commission. Beckwith: Doctors, lawyers, chaplains get those direct commissions. Now, before you can function, you have to go off to what was called by one of the instructors "genteel boot camp." (Flatt laughs) But because of the turn-down in the war, in 1972, reservists, folks who were not going to go on active duty, inactive reservists, had a two-week program that showed you how to wear the uniform and salute and told you a lot about various and sundry things that would assist folks to do ministry in the Navy.

That was in San Diego. It was in January of 2003 [*sic*] [1973], o we packed up the whole family and went out there for a delightful two weeks.

While we were there a tragedy occurred in the family. My father-in-law was killed, so we all flew back on a weekend to go to the funeral. Because I had not completed my duty, I had to go back out; so I flew back out and completed a couple of days and then drove home by myself. I had one of those important lessons in life. When I was getting my leave papers signed, the chaplain, interestingly enough, said to me, “Now, you’re to be here at 7:30 a.m. on Monday morning, and there’s only **one** excuse why you would not be here.” And I said, “And that would be, sir?”

Flatt: Death.

Beckwith: Dead. Exactly. And I thought, Whoa.

Flatt: (laughs) Whoa.

Beckwith: These folks are serious. It all kind of goes together, because though not in **that** case, it was more administrative than anything else—you know, if you’re going to get paid for it, you’ve got to put your time in—but in any kind of military organization, if you weren’t present when you were supposed to be, could result in mission failure, and that generally, in a combat situation would cause loss of lives. So all of that was grist for the mill.

Flatt: So you got back in time.

Beckwith: Oh, yeah. There was some question about it, because those were the days when the skies were really crowded, in 1973, and I remember flying from Detroit to Chicago and circling for hours. This was before they got the computers up, and they wouldn’t let you take off until they could pretty much understand where you were going to land. I was afraid I was going to miss my plane to San Diego, but didn’t, and got in about one o’clock in the morning, and was standing tall at 7:30.

Flatt: (laughs) Good. Well, I’m glad you weren’t dead. (laughs)

Beckwith: Yes, yes.

Flatt: Or didn’t have to claim that, at least.

Beckwith: Yeah.

Flatt: Okay. Let’s talk a little bit about your duty, then, once you had your—what did you call it?—your genteel...

Beckwith: ...boot camp.

Flatt: (simultaneously) ...boot camp.

Beckwith: Actually, that was really later on. Chaplain school was eight weeks, but, as I said, inactive reservists weren't authorized to go because it cost money, and they didn't want to spend the money. But in 1974 that requirement was changed, and we had a chance to go. I took advantage of that, and so I went to the real genteel boot camp, at which we had a Marine DI to indoctrinate us in the customs of the Marine Corps. He was a gunny, Gunnery Sergeant, and that's an E7. He was a wonderful guy, great mentor, taught us a lot, and I hold great affection for him, as most Marines have for their DI, their Drill Instructor. I've run across him from time to time in the fleet—now long retired, I'm sure. But that kind of jumps ahead a bit. That was the genteel boot camp. The two weeks in San Diego was mostly a classroom. It was taught by instructors from the Navy chaplain school, one of which was an Episcopal priest who became Bishop of the Armed Forces, Charles Keyser. He and I crossed paths numerous times. He had a long and distinguished career. Also crossed swords once or twice, not only in the military but in the House of Bishops at the Episcopal Church.

Flatt: You mean you had spirited discussions. (laughs)

Beckwith: More than that. Disagreement on proper protocol, and that's a story in itself.

Flatt: What did they teach you in this more extended school? Clearly you knew the clerical things, so was it how to apply them? What was it about?

Beckwith: Really important. Things like how to go aboard a ship, because there's protocol. You don't just walk on board. When you're going on board, you first salute the National Ensign, generally on the stern of the ship; interestingly enough, it's not the United States flag, it's only the blue portion of the flag, and so you would salute that. Then you would salute the Officer of the Deck and request permission to come aboard. "I request permission to come aboard," and they say, "Permission granted," and then they find out what you're about. If you're the ship's chaplain, of course, they know you. Leaving, it's the same thing—you salute the Officer of the Deck and "Request permission to go ashore, **sir**"—even if you outrank him, because he's functioning for the captain. Then when you get down the gangplank, you would stop and salute the ensign on the stern of the ship. You generally don't see it; you just salute in that direction.

Flatt: Well, you might be interested to know that serious boaters, people with boats of some size other than just a little fishing boat—not necessarily yacht-sized, but just nice-sized ships, boats that people maybe live on and so forth—you don't salute, but you follow the protocol of knocking and requesting permission to board.

Beckwith: I didn't know that.

- Flatt: Yes. I don't know that anybody asks for permission to leave so much, but it's like knocking on the door of your house, when you think about it.
- Beckwith: Sure, sure. Yeah. Well, that, but all the communication stuff. Eight-week course: How to write a Navy message, how to do a memo—because there's a standard form—how to do an instruction that you might want to draft for the captain's signature. Instruction would be how the command would operate relative to the religious program. So all the communication stuff.
- Flatt: Same principle as you have in the church, really. Beckwith: Sure, sure, sure It was a packed eight weeks. One weekend we pretended to be Marines and had a shelter-half and went out someplace god-awful and had to get the tents in line; the gunny was there to make sure we did that. It meant that a lot of people had to tear theirs down and redo it. But really good stuff. Really good stuff.
- Flatt: Where was this school, again?
- Beckwith: That was in Newport, Rhode Island. They've just combined all the chaplain schools, the Army, Air Force, and Navy, to Fort Jackson, South Carolina. We have a priest who's an Air Force chaplain from this diocese there as a staff member.
- Flatt: That's interesting. Now, this is not strictly Episcopalian chaplains, obviously.
- Beckwith: Oh, no.
- Flatt: These are chaplains of all the denominations.
- Beckwith: Absolutely.
- Flatt: I'm curious, once I started thinking about you and your duties—how you handle chaplaincy duties with people of other faiths.
- Beckwith: Well, there's a principle in the Navy—and I assume in the other services as well, although I've never heard them say it quite like this—"A Navy chaplain's ministry is to provide for their own, to facilitate for others, and care for all—everybody in the command." So that would mean doing Episcopal services for Episcopalians; facilitating, getting a Roman Catholic in to do the Eucharist or the Mass for Roman Catholic sailors; or assisting leaders of various denominations to do services, as would be their custom; and then caring pastorally for everybody. It's kind of a fine line. Obviously everybody's welcome to the services that I would do.
- Flatt: As they are in your church.
- Beckwith: As they would be in the church. But to proselytize would be inappropriate.

Flatt: Yes, particularly in that kind of circumstance where you might outrank others.

Beckwith: Right. And just because they're in those kinds of quarters, what else are you going to do. And my experience was that a number of folks became Episcopalian as a result of my ministry. It was not a goal of my ministry, but if it happened, it happened—and it did happen.

Flatt: But some probably joined the denominations of ministers of other faiths as well, so I'm sure that would happen.

Beckwith: I had an experience when I was selected the Reserve flag Admiral Chaplain for the Navy. We would have meetings twice a year with all the Reserve admirals; there were fifty-three. You had your submariner, you had your aviation admirals, you had engineering officer admiral, you had all the various—what did they call them?

Flatt: Oh, fleet admirals and...

Beckwith: Well, no. It was like... We were 4105. That meant: forty one hundred, we were chaplains; 0-5 meant Reserve, and that was your designator. So most every designator had an admiral: doctors, nurses, lawyers—and most folks, more than one. PAO. (pause_

Flatt: Public affairs...?

Beckwith: ...Officer. But you had surface warfare, you had...

Flatt: Submarine warfare.

Beckwith: You had all kinds of folks. And so there were like fifty-three. Twenty-one or twenty-plus were Roman Catholic. You might think that that was appropriate. Thirteen were Episcopalians. You had three or four Methodists and three or four Presbyterians and three or four Baptists and whoever else. You just had a smattering of folks. I thought, Gee, Episcopalians are only about 1.5 percent of the population—even less, these days; isn't that strange? And my thesis became: When they were at the Naval Academy—

Flatt: "They"?

Beckwith: "They," these admirals.

Flatt: The admirals, okay.

Beckwith: When they were students at the Naval Academy, they had Roman Catholic and Protestant. This would have been back in the '50s and '60s. They had Protestant, and they had Catholic. The Protestant, the senior chaplain, was always an Episcopalian by custom—not by law, but by custom. They changed that in the '70s—appropriately. The Book of Common Prayer was in the pew

in the Protestant chapel, the big chapel. In those days, chapel was required, so you're put in this crucible, and all the pressure, and these people were converted as a result of that.

Flatt: Interesting.

Beckwith: Now, if you did that same survey in admirals, (makes whistling sound) you'd be lucky to find an Episcopalian, though from time to time there is an Episcopal senior chaplain at the Naval Academy. I'm not familiar with one. I don't know that one has been assigned since the very early '70s. There was also the Chapel of Cornelius the Centurion on Governor's Island. In those days [Governor's Island was] the headquarters for the Coast Guard, and because that chapel had been given by Trinity Episcopal Church, Wall Street and they owned that building, the custom was the senior chaplain was also an Episcopalian. But that's changed, too. As a matter of fact, Wall Street has given the chapel to the Coast Guard, and now I think it's a state park for New York City because the Coast Guard has left.

Flatt: That's interesting, isn't it? Beckwith: Is to me. Some of these sound like sea stories, maybe, and I don't want to bore people, but anyway.

Flatt: No. Well, we're talking to a Navy man. (laughter) Let's see. Let's talk a little bit more about chaplains' duties and training. Of course, as a reservist, you were not expected to be engaged in a lot of battle-type operations, but clearly chaplains in wartime—let's say in the Army—you often see movies or whatever, and a chaplain is there caring for...—

Beckwith: In combat.

Flatt: ...the spiritual needs of people who are badly wounded and probably dying.

Beckwith: Right. On the battlefield. As a matter of fact, in Vietnam, a Medal of Honor winner, posthumously, was a Navy chaplain. A ship's named after him. I ought to remember the name, but I don't. Roman Catholic. He was with the battalion, they were moving, and they got in a firefight; he exposed himself to help mortally wounded troops, and he was killed. And as you know, since the Civil War—the Civil War, apparently was different—but since the Civil War, to win the Medal of Honor, you don't just get that for...—

Flatt: Good behavior.

Beckwith: ...extraordinary accomplishment. You read that stuff, and it's **unbelievable**. So it was pretty unusual.

On a ship, everybody has a battle station. The chaplain's battle station is in the infirmary. That's mid-ships, down somewhere, and unless the ship gets hit really bad with something, torpedo or missile or bomb, they're probably not too exposed.

- Flatt: Well, of course, they put the infirmary in that position on purpose to have it be relatively protected, right?
- Beckwith: Sure. The Navy supplies chaplains to the Navy, of course, to the Marine Corps, to the Coast Guard, and to the Merchant Marines.
- Flatt: How about the Seabees?
- Beckwith: Seabees—part of the Navy.
- Flatt: Part of the Navy, right?
- Beckwith: Yeah. With Marines and Seabees, it would not be unusual to see combat, because you could be in a situation where, though you wouldn't be leading or out with a fire team, for example—generally, although I knew chaplains from Vietnam who did go on fire team patrols—
- Flatt: Well, like the one you mentioned, apparently.
- Beckwith: Yeah, nobody—well, no, that was the battalion moving, so—
- Flatt: Oh, okay.
- Beckwith: He was the battalion chaplain; he was with the battalion.
- Flatt: Okay.
- Beckwith: Fire team's three people. They go out.
- Flatt: Oh, All right, got it.
- Beckwith: I'm sure if anybody knew about that, they would have said, Don't ever do that again. Or, don't do it. You know, "Hey, skipper, is it okay? I'm going to go..." "No, it's not okay."

Chaplains are non-combatants, and by the Geneva Convention, to which we subscribe as a nation—though we've not signed it—chaplains cannot bear arms. Doctors are not aggressors, cannot be aggressors; *i.e.*, they don't carry offensive weapons like a rifle. They can carry a sidearm to protect themselves and their patients. But a chaplain is not authorized to even do that. And that raises an issue how come you're an expert shot in both the .45 and, later on, nine millimeter, and an M-16? We can talk about that if you like. That raised questions with some folks. Not supposed to do that. That sends the wrong message. Well, the only message it sent for me, that I meant it to send, was I was a chaplain with the Marine Corps and I knew what they did because I'd done it. Would I be likely to carry a weapon in combat? Not at all. Would I, if I felt the need to defend myself or other folks with a weapon I found or was available—having been in combat? Probably, but that remains to be seen.

In one of the courses of instruction, we were being taught that in chaplain school, and the gunny said, “When assigned to the Marine Corps you always get a chaplain’s assistant.” These were in the days before the Navy rate of chaplain assistant, which we called Religious Program Specialist. Before that time, you’d be assigned a Marine. It would not be unusual that you’d be assigned a Marine that Marines didn’t want: (Flatt laughs) We’ll help this guy, give him to the chaplain. But that’s not the kind of guy you wanted. What you wanted first of all, the gunny said is, “That’s why you want to have a real good relationship with the skipper and the XO [Executive Officer] of the unit, so you could get the kind of guy who would be helpful to you. And the first thing you want to know is, Is he an expert shot? The second thing you want to know is, Is he a good driver? And the third thing you want to know is, does he get along well with the troops? Because if he does all those things, you’re going to be taken care of very well.” I think that was good advice. Then he also said, “If you need a weapon, there will be a lot of them laying around.” Well, thank God I’ve never been in combat. Never want to be in combat. I have great admiration for those who put themselves in harm’s way. I think anybody who raises their hand in the military does that, potentially.

Flatt: Absolutely.

Beckwith: I retired in 1999—to jump to the end just momentarily—and I never missed it until 9/11, and then I thought, Whoa. You know, when the fire bells are ringing, the fire horse wants to go where the action is. But anyway. (pause)

Flatt: So where did you get the skill with the firearms?

Beckwith: Well, I was with the battalion, and they were out qualifying; the first sergeant says, “Come here, Chaplain. Shoot this.” I said, “No, no, no, I’m non-combatant.” And he says, “That’s okay. I respect that, but you need to know what these guys do.” It was a great experience, and I was good at it.

Flatt: (laughs) You must have been one of those naturals, because (laughs) you probably didn’t practice a whole lot...

Beckwith: Didn’t.

Flatt: ...but expert is the highest level, and you were expert in both long guns and pistols, right, or side arms I guess is the right term.

Beckwith: Right, right. The M-16 is such an amazing weapon. At two hundred yards—or even a hundred yards, that’s a football field—the target bulls-eye is smaller than the sighting post on the front of the barrel. To miss was surprising because it was so accurate. Now, if there was any kind of a cross-wind, you had another kind of thing. But this would be early in the morning, like seven o’clock, and you could see the vapor trail from the bullet going downrange. It was just a great experience.

The same thing happened when officers were qualifying with the nine millimeter. Actually, it was the .45. Forty-five was **hard**. Lots of kick. It's like forty yards or something—it's not all that far—but to hit the target was tough, and that took some doing. Nine millimeter—much more accurate. The weapons that you got—at least when we were firing .45s—were old, and the mechanism that ejects the shell would be loose, so the bullet would come out at various and sundry angles. (laughter)

Flatt: To say the least.

Beckwith: Yeah, so that was hard. The first couple times I shot the .45, I didn't qualify.

Flatt: But you did eventually.

Beckwith: I did, yeah.

Flatt: Okay. Why don't we talk a little bit about some of the specific things that you did, because you did them interleaved with your church duties...

Beckwith: I did.

Flatt: ...back at home. As you said, it was a nice kind of duty because you could be there. I'm sure Melinda appreciated the kind of service you had, as well as your boys.

Beckwith: Got a little old mid-range. I remember we were in—it must have been the middle—well, let's see. It would have been in 1984. I had just come back from some temporary active duty, and we were jogging. This was in late July, and I had just missed another wedding anniversary—and probably had missed six out of the last eight...(musing) Let's see. No, it would have been—'60, '70, '80—it would have been '89, would that be right? I said to her, "What do you want to do on our twenty-fifth wedding anniversary?" Which would have been the next year—'65, yeah. This would have been '89, summer of '89. And she said, "Oh, are you going to be around?"

Flatt: (laughs) Ooh, and bells started ringing.

Beckwith: Yeah. So on our twenty-fifth, we went to Hawaii. But (laughs) I also did Navy duty while I was over there. (laughter)

Flatt: That made you real popular.

Beckwith: Well, actually, she didn't mind too much because we had some time around that, with our kids even; especially before they went to school, they always went to training with me.

Flatt: Oh, that was good.

Beckwith: We had a great time.

Flatt: That makes a big difference, doesn't it?

Beckwith: Had a great time. And if it were in the summer, except for the duty I had at Twenty Nine Palms in desert warfare training—that was unaccompanied. They didn't go there because that was out in the field. I went like five times there, and that was grim—another —grim because it was so difficult. Heat—really... They can call it dry heat if they want, but it's really bad. Blackball temperature was 140, 120 in the shade, and there wasn't any, unless you made it, anyway.

Flatt: Well, let's back up, and if you don't mind, let's just quickly go through some of your assignments. From '74 to '78, you had "Fleet Religious Support Activity—Atlantic." What was that?

Beckwith: It was a new concept in ministry. Instead of a chaplain being assigned to a ship, they were assigned to an activity, Fleet Religious Support Activity, and that was in Norfolk—there were three stations, Norfolk, [Virginia]; Charleston, South Carolina; and Mayport, Florida. So your active duty chaplains would be assigned under a chaplain on the pier, and then as ships went out, they'd be assigned to go with various ships. You didn't have a ship. You didn't work for a commanding officer, you worked for Fleet Religious Support Activity. It **never** caught on. It was all the rave for about five, six years. Never went to the West Coast. It got caught up in political maneuverings, and the guy who thought of it was a bright guy, and this was seen—I remember them calling it "Yankee ingenuity." But it never caught on.

Flatt: Well, it seems to me on the surface that the same thing that happened in Korea, where it seemed like instead of taking units together, they would fill in; as they were depleted in this unit, they'd bring in some new guys. Now, they've learned to put so much more emphasis on teamwork. Well, in a way, the same kind of thing, isn't it? You were never part of the team you worked with; you were a person put in ad hoc.

Beckwith: Submarines... Nowhere does a submarine rate a chaplain, so you would have a chaplain assigned to a submarine squadron. Nowhere is a chaplain assigned to a destroyer; you would be assigned to a destroyer squadron. Cruisers had chaplains assigned, aircraft carriers, battleships [had chaplains assigned]. They thought it would be better to have a group of chaplains that they could send out. If destroyers were deployed, the chaplain would go, and then he would go to the various ships wherever they were operating. And it did work. It worked well in some ways, but it never caught on.

When I first became a chaplain in '72, as the recruiter said, "We're losing our chaplain at the Reserve Center. Are you interested?" I was Chaplain of the Saginaw Naval Reserve Center. I was only there about a year—I wasn't there two years—and

that changed. There were not going to be chaplains assigned in a pay billet to a Reserve center. You would be assigned to a Fleet Religious Support Activity. Your active duty would be with the Fleet Religious Support Activity in Norfolk; Charleston; or Mayport, Florida. And then you would be assigned collateral duty at the Reserve center.

Now, in those days, they also went from two-day requirement drill to one-day because of the pay issue. But to get a good year, you still had to pick up those extra points. So you could drill no pay at the Reserve center, which I would do, and get a point—actually, get two points—and then we would on a monthly basis drill one day at—maybe it wasn't even once a month. It might have been once a quarter. We would drill as a unit at Fort Custer, Michigan outside of Battle Creek.

Flatt: Now, you say “drill”—did you get out and march and that kind of stuff?
(laughs)

Beckwith: No, no, no. Drill is whatever you did. I can remember (laughs)—I was assigned to a Marine fleet—no, MAFREL—M-A-F—Marine Amphibious Force Religious group. That was essentially Fleet Religious Support Activity, except for the Marine Corps. You had five or six or eight chaplains assigned to one of these MAFRELS, and then you would be assigned to various and sundry Marine Corps units. I can remember reporting aboard after I'd moved to Columbus in 1978. There was a chaplain who was the XO of the unit who was **really** gung-ho, and he thought one of our drills ought to be... It was two drills; because it was Marine Corps, you had two drills. That was one of the good things about going from the Fleet Religious Support Activity to the MAFREL, to the Marine Corps, because your pay got doubled. But **he** thought we ought to get all our gear and take a ten-mile hike and then camp out, and then march back the next day, in Columbus. And I said, “I don't need to practice being uncomfortable. I mean, I don't need that.” Well, that didn't make him very happy. I'm pleased to report, however, we never did that.
(Flatt laughs) And somewhere—

Flatt: Maybe someone else spoke up as well. (laughs)

Beckwith: Somewhere along the line, he fell by the wayside. I think he was a lieutenant commander at the time, and I was only a lieutenant, but I didn't share his enthusiasm for going out and sleeping on the ground.

Flatt: Well, poor ideas have a way of (Beckwith laughs) losing credence, don't they?

Beckwith: Yeah, yeah.

Flatt: We still have some more things to talk about and another change of venue for you. Let's just pause for just a couple of minutes.

(pause in recording)

Flatt: We're back on the air now with Peter. All of this Fleet Religious Support Activity takes place while you were also conducting your church duties in Saginaw, Michigan, and it bears repeating that you were doing parallel duties here. So at the end of '78, you have a change of venue, Peter. Would you talk about that?

Beckwith: End of '78, I was called to be the rector of St. John's, Worthington, the congregation I had grown up in.

Flatt: Worthington, Ohio, that was, right?

Beckwith: Worthington, Ohio.

Flatt: Back home.

Beckwith: Very unusual kind of thing. I had known people to go back home, and it never worked very well, so I was very kind of skittish about that, but—

Flatt: Well, you were a football hero.

Beckwith: (laughs) Yeah. Well, not in high school. Well, not anywhere, actually. A lot of people thought they knew me. I'd been gone for twenty years.

Flatt: People change.

Beckwith: People knew my family. Yeah, but it worked out very well, and as a result of that change of civilian ministry venue, I had a change of venue in my military ministry.

Flatt: Okay, before we get to the military, what does a rector do? Is that above and beyond what the priest does?

Beckwith: No, no.

Flatt: Because you were rector at—

Beckwith: Saginaw.

Flatt: —St. John's.

Beckwith: Right. You're a priest, if you're a vicar or a rector or assistant or whatever.

Flatt: Once a priest, always a priest?

Beckwith: Right. Rector is your position in relationship to the church ministry. "Priest" tells you what he does; "rector" tells you who he is. Vicar would be the priest in a mission; the difference between a mission and a parish is generally size,

but it's measured by, "Are you financially independent?" Interesting that you would measure it that way in a spiritual organization, but that's the way it gets measured.

Flatt: Well, that's the reality of things sometimes. Church buildings have to be maintained; help has to be...

Beckwith: Of course. But there's also an issue relative to that: if you pay your own way, the congregation can make decisions that, if they don't pay their own way they can't make. So there's a lot more independence in a parish. The priest has rights and privileges that you don't have in a mission. In a mission, you're essentially working for the bishop, and he can fire you anytime he wants. In a parish, you cannot be fired.

Flatt: Except by the parish, I presume.

Beckwith: Right.

Flatt: I was just curious, since I don't know how all that hierarchy stuff works, so... So you're back home, and, as you said, that changed your military venue as well.

Beckwith: Right. For a while, my folks lived in Hillsdale, Michigan—outside of Hillsdale, on a lake—and I would go up, stay all night with them, and then go over to Battle Creek for the drill of the Fleet Religious Support Activity unit to which I was assigned. When I had inquired from Saginaw to Columbus to see if there was a pay billet, I was told there weren't any pay billets. And when I get to Columbus, the interim at St. John's happened to be a Navy Reserve chaplain who belonged to this Fleet Religious Support Activity—405 was the number designation for that unit. He said, "Oh, we've got billets." And so I went down and investigated, and sure enough, there was. I had been promised a billet with the Marine Aircraft wing, and that appealed to me, because I had joined the Navy for a reason; to pack up everything I had and go to the field wasn't one of the reasons I joined the Navy. "Haze, gray and underway" was the thing that attracted me. And so I was told, Yeah, join the unit; you'll be with the air wing. So I joined the unit, and the skipper passed me in the passageway one day at the Reserve center, and said, "Oh, Beckwith, by the way, you're with the grunts"—that's an infantry battalion. (Flatt laughs) I said, "What?"

Flatt: That's a Marine term, isn't it?

Beckwith: Yeah. He said, "Yeah, you have to be a lieutenant commander to go with the wing." I went, "Oh, brother." My first time in the field with Marines was a real shocker, but I learned to love it. They are absolutely great people.

Flatt: Now, were you the training officer of the Naval Reserve—

- Beckwith: I was.
- Flatt: —4th Marine Amphibious Force Religious Unit 405 Columbus at that time?
- Beckwith: If you take out those first letters, MAFREL—MAF—Marine Fleet—
- Flatt: Amphibious.
- Beckwith: Oh, they've changed it. Oh, 4th. Yeah, 4th MAFREL. "Fourth" means 4th Marine Division, which is the Reserve Division, and then Marine—MAF—M-A-F—Marine Amphibious Force—and then REL so it's a MAFREL, religious unit 405.
- Flatt: Okay. I gotcha. Beckwith: I was the training officer, and the reason I was the training officer, because I was the third-senior officer.
- Flatt: Old man again. (laughs)
- Beckwith: No, not in age, but in rank. The CO was a captain; the XO was a **very** senior lieutenant commander. I was the senior lieutenant, and there was nobody above me, so I was the training officer.
- Flatt: Is that what they call it, senior lieutenant, as opposed to lieutenant JG, junior grade.
- Beckwith: Well, no. Senior lieutenant would mean I had lots of time as an O3. You generally spend about six years in a particular rank in the Navy Reserve in those days, and I probably had been a lieutenant—well, let's see. That was 1978, and so five years.
- Flatt: You joined in '72, wasn't it, so...
- Beckwith: Let's see. The next year, I was promoted to lieutenant commander. So I was very senior in the grade of being lieutenant. But when I was a lieutenant JG, I happened to say to a line officer "lieutenant." I referred to the rank as "full lieutenant," and he said, "What do you mean, 'full lieutenant'?" Now, this is getting an education the hard way. And I said, "You know, you got the railroad tracks." He said, "No, no, no, there's only one rank of lieutenant. It's not 'full lieutenant,' it's **lieutenant**. And then there's lieutenant JG, which is lower than...", well, you could fill it out. Yeah.
- Flatt: (laughs) All right, I got it. So you were a senior lieutenant when you got to Worthington or about that same time—you had been for a while, probably. And you said something about you ended up loving it.
- Beckwith: I did.
- Flatt: You were surprised, but you ended up loving it—

- Beckwith: I did.
- Flatt: —and being in the 4th Marine Amphibious Force. What did they do?
- Beckwith: Well, for your summer training, you would go somewhere with Marines and live with them; that generally was out in the field somewhere.
- Flatt: Now, these were Marine trainees?
- Beckwith: No, they were Reservists.
- Flatt: Reservists. Okay, sure. Beckwith: And so they were available for recall. They'd already been trained. Most of them, if not all of them—I would guess all of them—had had active duty as a Marine, and now they're in the Reserves, and they were everything from—ah, you wouldn't find too many privates, but corporal on up.
- Flatt: Okay. And the amphibious force means that they go on the boats? Or they did?
- Beckwith: Yeah. That's—
- Flatt: That's what they're reserved from?
- Beckwith: That's not a special thing for Marine infantry. They're all amphibious.
- Flatt: Okay. Well, the term Marine means sea. (laughs)
- Beckwith: Exactly. I remember, probably a major saying one time, “There are two kinds of Marines: those who've been in combat and those who are going to combat” (Flatt laughs) or going to be in combat. Every Marine—unlike other military organizations, every Marine, first of all, is a rifleman. That's O3 is the military designator, the MOS—Military...
- Flatt: Occupation Specialty.
- Beckwith: Exactly. All of those folks are first of all an infantryman. It doesn't matter what else you do—you can be a lawyer, Marine lawyer. Navy lawyers aren't first riflemen, but Marine lawyers are.
- Flatt: Well, Marines originally, if I understand it correctly, were the same kinds of things as Army, except they got there on the ships.
- Beckwith: They were (overlapping; inaudible). Yeah, well. Early on—
- Flatt: They didn't fight aboard the ships, I believe.
- Beckwith: Yes, they did.

Flatt: They did? They were artillerymen and that kind of thing?

Beckwith: They would be up in the rigging. (looking at a picture) You were asking had I gained any weight. What do you think?

Flatt: Not very much.

Beckwith: That's an official photograph. Oh, are you kidding me? I weighed about 170 there. I was a captain, and that was taken in '94. That was the picture I used when I was coming up for rear admiral. It's not in here. So, I was looking for the—but we'll keep looking.

Flatt: That paper rattling might be rattling your mike, anyway.

Beckwith: Okay. I'll be careful. Okay, where are we with the questions?

Flatt: Okay. Well, we were with the 4th Marine Amphibious Force.

Beckwith: Fourth Marine—yeah. They're all riflemen, and they would be up in the riggings with rifles, you know, from the earliest time musket-loaded rifles, and then they would shoot down on other sailors and—

Flatt: Well, I learned something interesting. I didn't know that.

Beckwith: And the Marines—their cover—their hat on the top has a quatrefoil. Do you know what that is, that little twist?

Flatt: Yeah.

Beckwith: And the reason they have that is because from the earliest days, that's how they could tell their people from the bad guys.

Flatt: Okay. We'll, that's a good reason, isn't it? (laughs)

Beckwith: Yeah. Little piece of...

Flatt: Lore. All right, so you did that for a couple of years.

Beckwith: Did that for actually quite a few years. Then I became a commanding officer—which was a real surprise—because the O6 moved away and the O4 retired, and I was an O4 at the time. And actually, they had downgraded it. They didn't want anybody over an O4 to be the CO, so I was it. That was probably the first true leadership position I had, and it was very important. Up until that time, it was not required to have a commanding officer spot to make captain or flag;⁴ it became so, because it was just one of those things that they wanted people to have, and it was available. If you didn't have it, they figured you didn't qualify.

Flatt: Well, one characteristic of that time—in the background here—up until 1990, this was peacetime. We had various things happen: Cold War during Reagan's administration in the eighties, and then in '90, Iraq invades Kuwait and things change. But was there any difference in emphasis with this peacetime? Was it strictly a readiness and alertness proposition?

Beckwith: Yeah.

Flatt: Which makes sense, doesn't it? (laughs)

Beckwith: Right. Really changed after the invasion of Iraq in the first gulf war in 1991, because you went from a Reserve force very quickly. In the next ten years, you went from a Reserve force to fully integrated. It's not unusual today to hear about National Guard troops being called up, and some people are on their second and third deployment.

Flatt: Oh, yes.

Beckwith: And in the old days, it was very unusual to be recalled to active duty. There were opportunities for what we called temporary active duty; you would go away for X time, either for a training program or to serve some capacity in the Navy. For example, I was the acting chaplain for the USS *Mount Whitney*, which was a command ship. That was a wonderful experience, but those were unusual, and people used to stand in line to get those assignments.

Flatt: Sounds that way. Well, you went from the Marine Amphibious [Force] to a couple of things for which I don't have dates, but you were [in the] Chief of the Chaplains Unit in Washington, DC. What was that about? A year of that, was it?

Beckwith: Right. After you spend so many years as commanding officer, then you **have to** move on. They don't want you in any job too long. I had an opportunity to go to the Chief of Chaplains Reserve Unit, and we would drill in Washington. The Reserve flag chaplain, the Reserve admiral, was the skipper of that unit; it was a prestigious position because you got to see the inner workings of the Chief Chaplain's office. I think I was probably a lieutenant commander at the time and probably a senior lieutenant commander, a senior in grade. It was a wonderful experience.

Flatt: What kind of duties?

Beckwith: Mostly administrative.

Flatt: Administrative. It would seem that way, certainly.

Beckwith: To kind of assist the Chief of Chaplain's office in seeing folks were being trained, and they were being trained correctly, and they were being assigned,

and the pay billets were being filled, and recruiting was happening, and all the facets of the program, from an administrative standpoint.

Flatt: Then you got to be—

Beckwith: As a matter of fact, I was in Washington, DC when the Air Florida flight hit the Seventeenth Street Bridge.

Flatt: Really.

Beckwith: It was a snowy night. The Navy Chief of Chaplain's office was in the Navy annex, and we left the annex, and we were going out. One of the unit members lived in Chevy Chase, and, geez, the traffic was backed up. Ours was flowing—it was slow because it'd been snowing—there was probably a foot of snow on the ground or close to it—six inches—it seemed like a foot—and not a lot of snow removal equipment in Washington, DC. And, Wow, what is this about?, because it was **just stopped** going the other way on the interstate into Washington. Got home, turned on the TV, and, of course, saw that tragedy.

Flatt: Okay. Then after about a year of that, was it, you went on an air assignment. Now, that was Navy Air as opposed to Marine Air?

Beckwith: It was. That [Chief of Chaplain's] unit was dissolved, for political reasons, I think. It would only be speculation if I talked about it, and it might not be appropriate to do that, to speculate.

Flatt: Well, it's okay.

Beckwith: But interestingly enough, there was a billet open at Rickenbacker Air Force Base in south Columbus—actually, in the old days, it was called Lockbourne Air Force Base, and I think it's called Lockbourne, Ohio—and sure enough, they had a billet there. I was the assistant chaplain and met a guy who was a senior commander—best chaplain I ever met, **great** mentor,—and I had a year or so of wonderful duty there with him. And at that time, I was promoted to commander, so I got promoted out of that billet. But another billet opened up, in...

Flatt: New Orleans?

Beckwith: New Orleans with the Marine Corps Air. That was a great unit, too. Again, had wonderful mentors, and...

Flatt: Well, by now, you must be doing a little mentoring yourself.

Beckwith: Well, I would hope so. I would hope so. (pause)

Flatt: There we go. This is you on the right. (looking at photo)

- Beckwith: I'm signing the papers to put on lieutenant commander. Those are brand new lieutenant commander boards. And, you see, that was at Naval Chaplain School when I was the Reserve instructor. Those are the old, what we used to call "ice cream whites" or something, because you had black trousers and white shirt. And that's Melinda, my wife.
- Flatt: Well, that's a nice picture.
- Beckwith: There's another one.
- Flatt: Oh, she's putting the new stripes on—
- Beckwith: Yeah, they're putting the boards on.
- Flatt: —and you're grinning. I'll bet she's grinning even wider.
- Beckwith: Yeah. That meant a pay raise.
- Flatt: This one's a better picture; why don't we keep this one?
- Beckwith: (looking at another picture) Oh, that's when we were out (Flatt laughs)—now, I'm the Reserve instructor here, but that gives you an idea of the training.
- Flatt: Yeah, boy, they'd better line up or gunny will be out there with his transistor something.
- Beckwith: This is the old days when you could have a beard.
- Flatt: Oh, my.
- Beckwith: And those are [Admiral] Zumwalt days; those days left.
- Flatt: You're the one in the sunglasses?
- Beckwith: No, no. No, no, no. I'm not in that picture.
- Flatt: Oh, okay.
- Beckwith: The guy going up on the sling—that's how you would get into a helicopter that doesn't land.
- Flatt: Oh, okay, sure. That's probably about as exciting as repelling, isn't it? Rappelling, I should say.
- Beckwith: Could be. (Flatt laughs) Yeah, it could be.
- Flatt: The first time, anyway. (laughs)

Beckwith: Yeah, it gets your attention, gets the adrenaline flowing. Geez, I haven't seen this stuff in a long time. (pause, turning pages) Now, that's that same picture on the—

Flatt: Oh, very nice, yeah. (pause) And here's your chaplain's designation.

Beckwith: Yes, those are dress blues. On the sleeve, it's known as the fat ensign stripe, because rear admiral, lower half, you get the fat stripe, and then you would get a stripe on top of that for rear admiral, upper half, or two stars.

Flatt: The day that I met you, when you and [Father] Gene Tucker were interviewing that young man, what caught my attention was—I guess that was Navy or Marine uniform, one or the—

Beckwith: It was Army.

Flatt: Yeah. I didn't mean Navy, I meant Army, because it was the tan outfit. I noticed the cross on his lapel in that case, and I knew that we didn't have a chaplain in our roster of people (laughs) in the Oral History Project, and so I thought, Oh, here's an opportunity, so I barged right into your conversation that day.

Beckwith: Yeah, that's all right.

Flatt: I'm so shy.

Beckwith: Yes. Okay, new questions.

Flatt: Okay, so you were with the aircraft wing in New Orleans.

Beckwith: Right, 4th Marine Aircraft Wing. Again, 4th would designate the Reserve. The commanding officer was a two-star, and I was the assistant chaplain to a guy who's now deceased. He was a marvelous chaplain himself, Presbyterian. He was just promoted. He had been assistant chaplain, and he was promoted to captain, and he flected up to become the chaplain. He interviewed me, and I got the job. We had a great time for about three or four years in New Orleans.

Flatt: Well, that's an interesting place to have assignments.

Beckwith: It is.

Flatt: (laughs) As long as you're not there when there's a hurricane.

Beckwith: We used to say, "It's a nice place to visit, but I wouldn't want to live there." It was pretty much an open sewer.

Flatt: Yes, in many ways. A lot of good restaurants though, and a lot of good jazz.

Beckwith: No bad restaurants because nobody goes to them and they close.

Flatt: Yeah, that's right.

Beckwith: Just scads of really good restaurants.

Flatt: You're still in Worthington and you're part of the Naval Construction Force, the chaplain for the Reserve Naval Construction Force. Now, explain that one.

Beckwith: That's the Seabees. Well, before that time, I was leaving the 4th Marine Aircraft Wing; my tenure had run out. I was a commander. I was looking for a billet. The active duty chaplain coordinator for the Reserve program in New Orleans said to me, "You ought to apply for the Seabee billet." He said, "You probably won't get it because you don't have any Seabee battalion experience. If you haven't been a battalion chaplain, they're probably not going to hire you to be the regimental chaplain, but if you don't apply, you're certainly not going to get it." So I applied.

I was at a training session, and he was there. I walked in, and we were just about ready to start, and he flags me over. There was a seat open next to him, and he said, "Come on over and sit down." I go over and sit next to him, and the class starts, and he leans over says, "By the way, you didn't get the Seabee billet." I said, "Really?" I said, "Well, I didn't expect to. Who got it?" He told me, and I said, "Son of a gun." I had had that guy; he had worked for me at Twenty Nine Palms and did a good job. They have this saying, Well, you know, you got him promoted. I don't know about that, but it certainly didn't hurt. He hadn't been promoted up to that point. And I said, "Well, how about that. You get somebody promoted, and then they stab you in the back. Ha-ha, and we go on. I'm kidding, of course; it's part of the deal, and we go on.

I'm in my office about a week later, and I get a telephone call. It's my secretary, and she says, "Father Beckwith, there's an Admiral Smart on the phone for you." And I'm thinking, Yeah, right, Admiral Smart. This has got to be somebody pulling my leg. So I go to the phone. I'm with the Senior Warden [of the church I'm serving in Worthington, Ohio], and we're talking about parish ministry. I go over to the phone and pick it up, and I'm trying to think of something cute to say.

Flatt: Smart-aleck to say, excuse the pun. (laughs)

Beckwith: And I'm thinking about saying, "This is Chaplain Stupid," and for whatever reason, I didn't say it, thank God.

Flatt: Maybe it was the hand of God. (laughs)

Beckwith: I said, "Hello." And, you know, that's not the way you'd answer the phone for an admiral. You'd say, "Yes, **sir**," or "This is Peter Beckwith, **sir**," and I just said, "Hello." He said, "Chaplain Beckwith?" I said, "Yes." And I'm trying to figure out whose voice it is. He said, "This is Admiral Smart"—it's Rear

Admiral Smart; he's a two-star. "This is Rear Admiral Smart." And I don't say anything because I'm still trying to figure out his name, who it is, figure out the voice.

Flatt: Or figure out whether it's a jokester, whether you ought to use the stupid line, huh?

Beckwith: It is a joke; it's got to be a joke. So I'm listening, and so there's this long, pregnant pause, and he says, "I am the commander select for the Reserve Naval Construction Force." And I said, "**Yes, sir.**"

Flatt: (laughs) I'll bet you did.

Beckwith: Because I knew there was nobody at St. John's Church that knows that kind of language. And he said, "Your name's been submitted to be my chaplain, and I want to interview you." I'm thinking, Well, he's going to want me to go to Kansas City, because that's where the headquarters office is. I said, "Well, I'd be pleased to do that. Do you want me to come to Kansas City?" He said, "No, if you've got a few minutes to talk on the phone." I look over at the Senior Warden, and I said, "Okay, I've got a few minutes." And so, you know, blah-blah, this, that, and the other thing, and he said, "I'd like to have you be my chaplain." I said, "Be honored, sir. May I ask you a question?" And he said, "Certainly." Now, you know, I'm a fairly junior commander. You don't ask questions like that. But I said—being the transparent person I think I am—I said, "I understood that somebody else had been selected for the position." He said, "Well, I did have somebody else in mind. He'd been my battalion chaplain. But my XO, my executive officer, has reviewed all the files, and you're the guy." After interviewing you, I'm convinced you are, and therefore, I'd like to have you be my chaplain, and besides"—

Flatt: Hired over the phone.

Beckwith: "And besides, I'm an Episcopalian." (Flatt laughs) And I said, "**All right.**" (Flatt laughs) From then on, we were **really** close friends, and I had the **privilege**, after he retired, to ordain him to the diaconate. So it's a wonderful world. So. There's a sea story for you, for what it's worth.

Flatt: Well, it was a good one. It was a good one.

Beckwith: And his picture's hanging on my wall, by the way.

Flatt: Oh, good.

Beckwith: And before I ordained him to the diaconate, he was in my service of consecration. Now, you're going to get diaconate right, right?

Flatt: (laughs) Now, you're referring to your elevation to bishop.

Beckwith: Right, consecration, or ordination as a bishop, yeah. All right?

Flatt: We still didn't take care of the staff chaplain, Naval Reserve Readiness Command, Region Five, which takes us up to '92, and after the onset of the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait.

Beckwith: Right. I was here. No, I was in Worthington, Ohio.

Flatt: You were in Worthington then.

Beckwith: And when that billet ran out—that was a two-year billet—one of the things I **hadn't** been is Reserve Readiness Command chaplain. In those days, the Reserves were divided up into Readiness Commands. It's changed so many times, probably they don't even do that anymore, but our headquarters were in Ravenna, Ohio, and from Columbus up there is probably about two and a half hours. It was a wonderful, wonderful billet. I worked with the readiness commander, and my job was to make sure that all the chaplains in the readiness command, which was Ohio, probably Indiana, Michigan—I don't know if Wisconsin was or not, I don't think so—were prepared for recall. And served there for, I think it was two years. Moved over here in the meantime. And going to Ravenna, Ohio—I remember the first time I drilled up there after coming here—that's when I was a lot younger—I left Glen Carbon, Illinois, which is right across the river from St. Louis, at nine o'clock at night, and drove to Ravenna, Ohio, and got there at quarter after seven, just in time to work my job, work all day.

Flatt: To be there and not to have to be dead. (laughs)

Beckwith: Worked all day, and then just was—I mean, I went to my quarters, which was a motel, and just collapsed just after work. I got there about 5:15 and got up at six o'clock, so eleven hours of sleep. It was like I'd been drugged. Interestingly enough, Captain DuVault was the CO of the Readiness Command, and he was really a great skipper. After those two years, I went back to New Orleans with the 4th FSSG Marine Corps Unit—Force Service Support Group—and I was an O6 at the time, and I was working for a two-star Marine general. When I got selected X years later—it must have been three years later—for flag and went to New Orleans for the orientation, guess who was the line officer who facilitated all of the administrative stuff for the reserve admiral? Captain DuVault. It was like old home week. He walked in, and he said, "Good to see you again, Admiral Beckwith, **sir**." I said, "Uh, don't '**sir**' me." (laughs)

Flatt: "Please call me Peter," huh?

Beckwith: Exactly. I'll be calling you 'sir.' But what a great guy. What a great guy. I ran into some difficulty in his command. I got crosswise with the XO, and as a result was put on report and went in to see the skipper. DuVault said, "Chaplain, you're supposed to be helping morale around here, not infecting

it.” I apologized profusely and said that I was not as aware as I should have been about my role as a chaplain and the influence I’d have. But most of the folks, certainly the folks with Marine Corps experience, would run at noon. The XO was overweight; he didn’t run, and he wanted some unity in the unit, so he decided we would do aerobics. Well, I’m with this Marine Corps colonel, and he and I don’t like it very much to begin with, but, eh, we’ll do the deal. We go over, and he wants us to do aerobics with Jane Fonda.

Flatt: You mean on the television screen?

Beckwith: Yeah, yeah. (Flatt laughs) And I’m not going to do it. I just said, “What are you thinking? All due respect sir”—we were the same rank—I said, “No.” I told Captain DuVault, “I’m at a disadvantage here. When I was skipper of the MAFREL [Marine Amphibious Force-Religion], my CO, the Reserve center CO, had spent seven years, seven and a half years, in the Hanoi Hilton⁵, and there were two things in this life he did not like: one was pumpkin—anything pumpkin—because that was his diet for seven and a half years—

Flatt: Oh, my. Ugh, can you imagine?

Beckwith: —or anything to do with Jane Fonda.⁶

Flatt: Yeah. Well, I can certainly understand that.

Beckwith: He was a gentleman in every way. I never heard him say a bad word. Never heard him say anything detrimental about Jane Fonda, but if anything had to do with Jane Fonda—I mean, we would be someplace and Jane Fonda would come on the television, and he would just get up and walk out. Out of respect for him, I just wasn’t going to do it. And he [Captain DuVault] said, “Thank you very much. That’ll be all.” I saluted and left. About ten days later, the XO was relieved, so that was the end of his career, and could very well have been the end of mine.

Flatt: Well, it seems very insensitive of him. He was probably looking at it as a good workout and maybe having a nice-looking female would inspire the guys to work hard, but—

Beckwith: I have no idea.

Flatt: —how could he not have been conscious of her role in denying America, which is my view of what she did? She might have been a famous and even a good actress, but my goodness, she was...

Beckwith: She starred in a movie called *Klute*. Did you ever see that?

⁵ Hanoi Hilton was the wry nickname for the brutal Vietnamese prisoner-of-war compound.

⁶ Jane Fonda was an attractive, well-known Hollywood actress. She led protests against the Viet Nam war, alienating very many of the military who served there as well as many Americans at home.

Flatt: Unh-uh.

Beckwith: I used to say she was typecast; she played a prostitute. There was nothing attractive to me about her.

Flatt: Anyway, we do know that you came to our fair city of Springfield...

Beckwith: 1992.

Flatt: 1992, Abraham Lincoln's town, before the Museum and the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library were here.

Beckwith: That's right.

Flatt: So you've seen a lot of things.

Beckwith: The tomb, the home, and...

Flatt: New Salem and the Old State Capitol.

Beckwith: New Salem and the Old State Capitol—that was it. Yeah.

Flatt: So you continued your duties, more service support, fleet Marine, and then in '94, you had another elevation.

Beckwith: (pause) Actually, I think it was '95, wasn't it? Does it say '94? I was selected in '94, I guess.

Flatt: Well, my typing is often in error.

Beckwith: No, I think...

Flatt: December '94, I wrote.

Beckwith: That might have been.

Flatt: Anyway, what happened?

Beckwith: Well, I had a wonderful archdeacon here; he had been enrolled in an Air Force officer training program right at the end of World War II, and the war ended, so he never got to serve, but he was just a neat guy in every way. Entrepreneur. He was a member of the church in Worthington, Ohio. He was ordained deacon under my ministry there and assigned to another church. When I came here, he and his wife came, and he was the archdeacon and she was my administrative assistant. Anything I got from the military, he'd bring it in, and he'd say, "**Bishop, hey, this could be it!**"—meaning notification of selection to flag. I said, "No, no, no, no. It doesn't work that way. No, no, it's not like that. It'll be a telephone call."

And it might have been Monday morning—I don't know when it was—it might have been a Friday morning. But he would get to the office at eight o'clock or 7:30, and I'd get here about 9:00, and his wife would get here about 9:00, and we would go to work at 9:00. He calls me about 8:30, and he said, "I'm kind of hesitant to say anything, but Admiral"—forget the guy's name; he was the head of the Navy Reserve. He's now a deputy undersecretary of the Navy—Tom hmm—"office is calling you." I said, "That could be it." So I call them back, and sure enough. They said, "Congratulations, you're selected flag." It's an incredible honor. There were a whole lot of really qualified folks, and to be selected out of that group is quite extraordinary.

Flatt: Well, congratulations.

Beckwith: Thank you.

Flatt: I'm a little after the fact, but nonetheless.

Beckwith: When I was working with DuVault and I was working with Rob Duremus, those guys had flag written all over them, and they were very helpful to me because they'd say things like, It's just not going to happen. You've got to be realistic about these things, because the chances—when you're an ensign as a line officer, to become a rear admiral is like one in...I don't know, eight thousand?

Flatt: Not good Las Vegas odds. (laughs)

Beckwith: No, no. And even as captain. I mean, I don't know how many people were in zone, but they were probably at least a dozen that were very qualified. The things that set you apart are the kinds of things that I was lucky enough to be selected to do. I was proactive in that. I **enjoyed** it, and so I always made myself available without trying to be pushy or manipulative. And I think those kinds of things help.

Flatt: Those count in the long haul, don't they?

Beckwith: I got a number of phone calls after I was selected, and one guy said, "Beckwith, how in the hell did you make flag?" And I said, "I listen to chiefs."

Flatt: (laughs) Chiefs run the Navy, they say.

Beckwith: Chief petty officer, E7. But, you know, first class, second class—I paid attention to these guys. They knew a lot about things that were going on in the ship, and—

Flatt: With the men, and most of them had very long service as well, to be a chief.

- Beckwith: Yeah. Twenty years, probably. Now, I knew a guy who made chief in five years, but that was extraordinary.
- Flatt: Rare. It was probably wartime, too, wasn't it?
- Beckwith: Yeah, it was Vietnam.
- Flatt: Let's again, for those who don't know Navy terminology—you've used the term "flag" several times. That's denotes an admiral's rank, first one being rear admiral.
- Beckwith: Rear admiral (lower half), which is one star; rear admiral (upper half), which is two star; three star is a vice admiral; and four star is admiral. Unique to the Navy and probably the Marine Corps—I'm not sure—they call it flag officer because you rate a flag at that point.
- Flatt: A flag where, on your uniform or on your...?
- Beckwith: No, on your flagpole.
- Flatt: At your post, okay, wherever you are.
- Beckwith: Right. And so when the admiral, one-star or two-star, is in residence, when he's on base at Great Lakes, on the command building there's a flagpole where his flag will be flying. It'll be a blue flag with a white star. Now, corps officers—so dental corps, medical corps—
- Flatt: Chaplain corps?
- Beckwith: —chaplain corps...the Seabees have a white flag with a blue star. And I've got my flag. Every once in a while—
- Flatt: I always wondered—
- Beckwith: —I fly it at home. I've got a Navy flagpole; it's got the flagpole with a yard arm on it, and so I'll fly it from time to time.
- Flatt: Good. Well, I thought it might have something to do with that, or I thought it might be something on your uniform, but now I know. I learned two things today.
- Beckwith: When a Navy plane lands and there's an admiral on board, they'll open the window and they'll put this little flag up. (Flatt laughs) Four-star, three-star, two-star, one-star. Yeah.
- Flatt: That's interesting. They don't do quite the same thing in the Army, do they?
- Beckwith: No, no, no, no. They don't have time for that.

- Flatt: (laughs) Well, you did continue to do various support kinds of things for the Naval Reserve, Marine Forces Reserve. Special assistant to a commander, Naval Reserve Force.
- Beckwith: Right. The head guy, the two-star, now three-star, in Washington, DC, who's the commander of the Naval Reserve, I was his assistant for religious ministries. I actually worked for him. You can always tell for whom you work because you get your fitness report from that person, and he wrote my fitness report. But I also worked for the Chief of Chaplains. I spent a lot of time in the Chief of Chaplain's office, coordinating Reserve activities of chaplains, just like I did—as a matter of fact, my office in Washington was in the—actually, I had two offices. I had an office over at commander Naval Reserve as well as the Chief of Chaplain's office. They were in different buildings.
- Flatt: You described these several things as collateral duties, so were you jumping from one to the other, or...
- Beckwith: You just had responsibility for those, and you spent the appropriate time there to...
- Flatt: Whenever.
- Beckwith: Right. If there was a problem, you dealt with that, but just to do the stuff, to make sure things were going well.
- Flatt: And clearly you had other good people here to handle church activities when you had to be away.
- Beckwith: I did. You know, the archdeacon and Jackie Moore. It's different because as a bishop, I have a flexible schedule. I need to do these things within the year; it's not, every Sunday I have to be someplace, so I could be in Washington. The last year was **really** hard. I was gone 105 days, 103 days—I think it was 105 days out of 365.
- Flatt: That's almost a third of the time.
- Beckwith: Yes. The problem is, all your days off and all your holidays are eaten up by that. It was enough of a change of pace so hopefully I didn't get stale anywhere except maybe at home. My wife put up with a lot in those days.
- Flatt: Well, from what you've said, she was a pretty supportive wife.
- Beckwith: She was very supportive.
- Flatt: But she couldn't go with you to some of those things as she had at other times.
- Beckwith: She was teaching school here. She would go to the flag meetings, which would be in Newport, Rhode Island, they were in San Diego, California, they

were some spectacular places, and she enjoyed that with the spouses of the admirals. But no, most of the time I went by myself. And there wouldn't be any reason for her to go because I'd fly out of here either early in the morning or late at night, and I'd work all day, and then I'd come home.

Flatt: Okay. Now, you've remained active. You do some things outside—although you ret—well, let me back up here. You retired from the Navy and added the R-e-t to your title in '92.

Beckwith: September 3, 1999.

Flatt: I'm sorry. '92 is when you became bishop. You're right. Navy retirement September '99, and that was after twenty-seven years of service to our country.

Beckwith: Twenty-seven years, three days. Actually, you don't officially retire until October one, but my retirement change of office was September third. You **have** to retire at sixty, and I turned sixty September '99.

Flatt: Otherwise, I suspect you would still be out there pounding away.

Beckwith: Eh, I doubt it, but I probably—

Flatt: Well, you're still doing things in the area.

Beckwith: I probably would not have been smart enough to retire at that time. It's a four-year billet, and I did three years. So you can only do four anyway, so I would have had to retire the next year. But it was enough, and I credited the Navy in my retirement speech that [with] their good sense, I was leaving, and I might not have been smart enough to see the appropriateness of that if they didn't have the requirement.

Flatt: If they didn't have like a boot coming at you from your backside? (laughs)

Beckwith: And as a matter of fact, we've got a DVD—no, not a DVD—what, the—

Flatt: Tape?

Beckwith: Yeah, of the retirement, which is hilarious. That might be interesting; we could maybe get you a copy of that if you're interested in it. You were asking about—

Flatt: Well, we could make the copy. I'll talk to Mark about that, but maybe we can.

Beckwith: You were asking about that. I think it's both of the retirement dinner, which was kind of a roast, and—well, it wasn't 'kind of' a roast; it **was** a roast. (Flatt laughs)—and then the next day, the retirement ceremony. And the Navy does it up right.

Flatt: I expect. I expect. Well, you have continued to do some things—I think, is it the state police?

Beckwith: State police. I became a chaplain of the state police in '95. I was asked if I had an interest—they were reactivating then—and I said, “Absolutely.” I was already looking four years in the future. You know, this is going to wind down, and there's some comparisons there.

Flatt: And you continue to do that to this day?

Beckwith: I do. As a matter of fact, I got a ribbon for civilian service. The Navy was encouraging sailors—officer and enlisted—to be involved in the community, and that was my project. So I got this little green ribbon (laughs) for that.

Flatt: You received a number of military recognitions, and we had some reference to them earlier. But we've been at this for almost three hours now.—I think what we will do is probably read them into the record later rather than taking more of your time, because I've already taken a lot of your time today, and there'll also be copies of them on the website. So let me talk with you now about some general things. I think I probably know your answers, based on what you've said so far, but what was your opinion of our participation in Vietnam?

Beckwith: Well, I think it was important. In the late '50s, early '60s, when Dien Bien Phu fell, the whole dominos theory has been debated, but communist expansion in southeast Asia was alive and well, and the danger, as we said before, Laos and Cambodia, all the other small nations were susceptible. [The French were defeated by the Viet Minh at Dien Bien Phu in 1954.] You think in terms of the end of that war and the Nixon administration. Then you had Ford take over for Nixon, then you had Carter for four years, and then we had Ronald Reagan, and it was Ronald Reagan that put a stop to that. I think it was very important. I think it was terribly unfortunate that the administration at the time, which was the Johnson administration, tried to run the war from Washington. McNamara didn't know how to build cars, having been responsible for the Edsel,⁷ and now he's Secretary of Defense? I don't think so. He was a whiz-kid brainchild, and didn't work in the auto industry, and it certainly didn't work there.

As a matter of fact, I think the record is clear that the military won the war there. After the last major battle, the Vietcong and North Vietnamese couldn't field a fighting force that was any kind of a problem. After what was the Tet Offensive, the last Tet Offensive, they lost tens of thousands of people. It was the Church⁸ Amendment that cut off funding to Vietnam that lost that war; they were able to take over the city and killed lots of people, imprisoned lots of people. It remains to this day a very sad chapter in the history of this

⁷ The Edsel car, named for Edsel Ford, scion of the Ford family, was a design so radical for its time it simply wasn't accepted by the public. Few were sold and the line was discontinued.

⁸ Senator Frank Church of Idaho

country. It flew in the face of that important military principle that I think... (sighs) Who was the great Chinese tactician?

Flatt: Sun Tzu?

Beckwith: Sun Tzu said, If you ain't in it to win it, get out. Now, that's paraphrasing.

Flatt: We had a speaker at the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Museum recently. I think he's retired, but was the chief historian for the United States Military Academy at West Point. He has written a book and was here and also gave a talk called "Abraham Lincoln as Commander in Chief." He reflected that Lincoln understood what McClellan didn't, and that was, that you not only had to defeat the enemy, you had to destroy the enemy. I thought that was a good way to put it, and basically it's what Sun Tzu said, and many others since, but that was just a recent event right here that called attention to—and probably a lesson for today with what's going on in Afghanistan.

Beckwith: Absolutely. McClellan wouldn't engage the enemy. You know, the Lincoln administration was interesting because he had **incompetent** generals. Lee of course was a military commander, a graduate of West Point, and was in the United States Army. He was the one who led the attack on Harper's Ferry in 1858, I think, when John Brown took over that munitions...

Flatt: Depot.

Beckwith: Depot. I guess it was an arsenal.

Flatt: Yes, that's the right term; you're right.

Beckwith: Also involved in that was a guy by the name of Jeb Stuart, who was U.S. Army. And interestingly enough, Lee led Marines in that. That would not happen today, that you'd have an Army—probably a colonel, or maybe he was a major then, lieutenant colonel or something—lead a group. But he was offered command of the Union Armies and went home to Virginia.

Flatt: Kept his loyalties at home.

Beckwith: Of course, Jeb Stuart did too. Lincoln had incompetent generals. When we were talking about Vietnam, the generals had incompetent administration. Under Lincoln, the generals wouldn't fight. Under Westmoreland, they wouldn't let them fight.

Flatt: Well, some of them did their best but weren't very good at it, and McClellan, who should have been good at it, wouldn't, and in fact, there's the famous letter in which (laughs) Lincoln wrote and said, "If you're not using your army, can I borrow it?" (laughs)

Beckwith: I'm not familiar with that, but that would... He had a marvelous sense of humor. Somebody was criticizing Grant for drinking, and Lincoln said, "Find out what he drinks and send a case to all my generals." you know, Grant was amazing in any kind of warfare. The Battle of Lookout Mountain was a turning point prior to going to Atlanta, which essentially cut the economic cords to the South, was a mortal blow. They weren't making any gains at all, and some folks got mad and just rushed up the face of the mountain, which is the improbable way to go, and won that battle. They were trying to go up the easy sides and weren't making any... I think that Grant just kind of scratched his head and said, Way to go, guys. I mean, that's not the way we were ever going to do it, but they did it.

Flatt: Well, and then on to Iraq One—the first gulf war, that is—you know, we didn't kill them off at the end. We had Saddam [Hussein] in hand, and it was a political decision.

Beckwith: A hundred days.

Flatt: —I think a lot of people—

Beckwith: Or a hundred hours. Was it a hundred hours?

Flatt: Something like that, yeah. No.

Beckwith: Hundred days?

Flatt: I think it was a hundred days.

Beckwith: That'll look good in the history books, won't it?

Flatt: Well, at the time we thought we'd have the U.N. backing and so forth, and then all that other stuff happened, and...

Beckwith: Yeah. There were some other issues there, not the least of which is, we accomplished what we said we would do: we went there to get him out of Kuwait, and we did that. And there was thinking that there just wouldn't be the support to go get him at that time.

Flatt: Everyone was war-weary.

Beckwith: I don't know how you can be war-weary after a hundred days, but—

Flatt: Well, but, you know—

Beckwith: You had Desert Storm, but you had Desert...

Flatt: Shield.

Beckwith: —Shield first, yeah. And there's a great book, by the way, by the commanding general—what was his name?—Schwarzkopf. I don't think I would have wanted to work for him because he was a screamer and a firer. He fired everybody every day. That'd get real old. *It Doesn't Take a Hero* was the name of that book, and it's a good book. I got as far as Rota, Spain, on my way over there. At one point, it looked like I was going to be assigned to the—I was an O6 at the time—senior chaplain at Dover, Delaware, where the military morgue is, to deal with the folks who would be dealing with the casualties coming back, the dead. It was kind of amazing, because most of these kids who would be responsible for all that had never seen a dead body, and they'd be dealing with pieces. Thankfully, that was a minimum. You remember that Hussein said that there would be tens of thousands of American casualties—ten thousand, maybe he said. No, not even close. And I must say, I was glad to see it end, but I was disappointed I didn't get closer to it.

Flatt: (laughs) The old war horse.

Beckwith: But I had a parishioner who had gone to the Naval Academy. She became a Marine. She was over in Riyadh, and they took some incoming missiles, and she died at about thirty-some years old—had gotten a medical discharge—and I think it could be easily traced to the chemicals to which she was exposed to in that combat zone. Incredible. We got our picture taken together. I swore her in as a midshipman in the press ceremony at the Naval Academy. She could run with the best of them, and when she died, she was three hundred pounds or something. I mean, she just blew up.

Flatt: Bloated up. Oh, terrible.

Well, do you think about our present situation. Here we are with the debate about whether what's been happening with people who have tried to destroy America, as to whether they're terrorists or criminals. What's your view of that?

Beckwith: I think it's a mistake to treat foreign illegal combatants as criminals. I think it's a huge mistake to give the likes of the folks [terrorist suspects]—who are going to be put on trial now in New York City, it looks like—that stage to spew their venom. These people are out to destroy, not us and not even America, but the way of life. Remember, we went into Afghanistan because they were killing little girls because they wanted to go to school. This is unconscionable. We can't stand by and do that. I mean, that would be like letting Hitler have his way. Sooner or later, you've got to stand up and you've got to smack them down. I mean, it's sad. You can't reason with an idiot, and these people are idiots.

- Flatt: I often say you can't make peace with people who aren't interested in peace. They have no interest in peace; they only have interest in domination, and, as you say, getting rid of another way of life. So, well, it will be interesting—
- Beckwith: When somebody thinks that their faith calls them to kill people, and if they die doing it, then they have a special place in heaven, how can you be reasonable with those kinds of people? You can't be reasonable. Now, if they're citizens of this country and they're terrorists, then they get the protection of the Constitution. But if you get arrested in another country for trying to overthrow this country and wage war illegally against this country, you don't get any rights except a military court.
- Flatt: Except they're getting it. [civilian criminal court]
- Beckwith: And that's unfortunate. The difference between a military court, to which I was subjected as an officer, is that you're guilty until proven innocent. You don't get the idea that—it's not just a preponderance of evidence, it's beyond a reasonable doubt. And so there's a big difference.
- Flatt: I'm troubled about giving them a forum, and it almost is bound to turn into a circus.
- Beckwith: It's no sense at all. And I think it's being done for political purposes, and I think it's going to backfire. We'll see.
- Flatt: Well, we'll see. We'll get together in a year and review.
- Beckwith: A hundred years from now, they can say, gee, that guy was either right on, or he was an idiot.
- Flatt: (laughs) Right. Well, I'm not supposed to issue opinions, so I should probably not have said what I did, but I do pray and hope that it will not turn into what I'm afraid it's going to turn into .
- Beckwith: There was a young man who was caught in Iraq and I think was in combat against the United States. He was a young man from California who had gone over to Saudi Arabia and was trained in one of those camps, or maybe it was to Pakistan, I don't know where. He was caught, and they didn't know he was a U.S. citizen till later. In another time not very long ago, he would have been hanged for treason, and it seems to me that would be a fitting punishment. I think we've lost our resolve to be the great country we were ordained to be under the Constitution and the 2 percent of the people in 1775 who put their lives and everything they had on the line.
- Flatt: Their lives, their treasure, and their sacred honor. Wasn't that the way it was said?
- Beckwith: Yeah, something like that.

Flatt: Okay. Well, I imagine that you have some definite opinions on closing the Guantanamo Bay prison.

Beckwith: (laughs) That's a huge mistake. You know, you make a campaign promise, and you try to live up to it. When you try to put structure around rhetoric, you're generally going to have problems, it seems to me. They're talking about the possibility. Of course, the state of Illinois is being run so responsibly by our government—I'm saying that facetiously—we've got this state-of-the-art prison, supposedly, in Thompson, Illinois. They're going to maybe sell that—good for us—to the federal government, and they're going to put another billion dollars or something into it to make it beyond supermax [security], and then they're going to employ two or three thousand people to take care of two hundred prisoners. If that makes sense to anybody, I'll eat this table we're sitting in front of.

Flatt: Well, the other factor in there is that we have a fine high-security prison now that's not where they can have two hundred prisoners; each one will be allowed ten visitors—I don't know what, a day or month or year, whatever—

Beckwith: No, I think it's you get ten visitors on your list, and then they can come and visit you during visiting hours which is maybe once a week or something.

Flatt: So now we're talking about potential of two thousand people who will be, obviously, of the same—most of them at least will be of the same vein as these people. (laughs)

Beckwith: It does make sense to put them there instead of in other correctional facilities where they can recruit the low life that are already there, but we'll see.

Flatt: Well, we'll see on that one too, won't we?

Beckwith: Yeah. I think they will live to rue the day they made that decision.

Flatt: Okay. Another general question, and this relates back to what you saw during your military service: are we caring adequately for our service personnel, especially the wounded?

Beckwith: (pause) I think the answer is absolutely not. The Veterans Administration is in disarray. There's the great debate now about health care reform. Well, if you want to see what the government does with medical care, go to the VA hospitals. There are some very good, but not very many; most of them are very bad. I can remember in the '70s it was clear to me, in Saginaw, Michigan, we had a veterans' hospital, and the only people who went there were people who couldn't afford anything else. It was abominable. The doctors didn't even speak English. It was like going into some kind of a sanitarium. It was terrible. And military hospitals haven't been all that hot. At Scott Air Force Base—just before they closed it, I went down there—and that was abominable. A general's wife, retired, had her gallbladder out there, and

they almost killed her. They didn't get the sutures in right, and she was getting peritonitis because they hadn't sewn her up, and they had to take her to Barnes [in St. Louis] and fix it.

(pause) There are exceptions. Bethesda is—of course, the president and the Congress go there, so there's really good care there. I know, I've been there. But Walter Reed they closed, and that was a sham. I mean, there were **rats** and vermin and all kinds of **garbage** there. People went in and couldn't believe it. That was the state-of-the-art for the Army. Well, I don't think so. There are probably three really top-notch hospitals in the military now. Actually there's one I think in Germany—I want to say Stuttgart, but I may be wrong. Tripler in Hawaii; Balboa, which is a naval hospital in San Diego; and Bethesda Naval Hospital. But last time I was there, Army doctors were working on me. And I said to them, "What'd you guys do to get here?" (laughs)

Flatt: That's kind of like President Reagan, saying to the doctors when they were about to operate him, "I hope you guys are not Democrats." (laughs) Okay...

Well, let's wind up here with advice to your children, your grandchildren, and, in your case, of course, your flock.

Beckwith: (pause) Well, there are a lot of people who've said it much better than I can say it, George Washington for one: The best way to **avoid** war is be prepared **for** it. That's a lesson the U.S. hasn't learned very well. We didn't learn it after World War I, and we didn't learn it after World War II, which led to World War II and to Korea. Somebody said (pause) something about, if the highest principle is physical life, it'll be a miserable existence. There's something more important than that, as our Constitution says and people who believe in the Constitution say. Freedom is really important, and it's worth people dying for. From day one, people have put their lives on the line to do that, and that's a wonderful heritage.

There's this story about de Gaulle⁹ going off on one of the generals about—this was after World War II—wanted all the American military out of France, and the general said, "Does that mean the people who are buried in your cemeteries, too?" There's this story about a Frenchman who was raising an issue at a NATO¹⁰ meeting wondering why they had to speak in English, and somebody from one of the other countries said, "Because if it weren't for the English and the Americans, you'd be speaking German."

Flatt: Interesting that it's now known as the lingua franca, isn't it? (laughs)

⁹ General Charles de Gaulle of France was a familiar figure in both World War I and World War II.

¹⁰ NATO: North Atlantic Treaty Organization, a coalition of the U.S. and several European countries developed for mutual defense against aggression.

Beckwith: Yeah. We are an **exceptional** country because we've not **ever** looked to expand our territory through war. You know, you could debate that about the Indian wars and maybe the Mexican war and maybe Philippines and the Spanish–American War. You know, you can make a case, but it's fairly weak. We could have expanded around the world like other empires if we had wanted to, and we didn't do that. Somebody said that we've only—this was fairly recently, and they were being challenged—the only territory we've ever requested as a result of our military action is a place to bury our dead. (pause) That really says it all. It talks in terms that we're really grounded in principle, not for any kind of self-aggrandizement, not looking to be anything except what we are, and that's people who love freedom and want to make that available to other people.

Flatt: And prefer peace over war but—

Beckwith: And the reality is this—

Flatt: —we'll go to war if we have to, right?

Beckwith: Yeah. If there's a people who's not free, my freedom is threatened—maybe not immediately, but it's threatened. People have to be free. Now, what do you do in the case of Iraq, or maybe more so in Afghanistan, and people who really don't care about that? They don't care about it. They don't care about they're free or not. Vietnam—they didn't care particularly if they were free or not; they wanted just to be able to raise some rice and eat and live in peace, live without people coming through, whoever it happened to be—the Americans or anybody else—coming the other way, destroying their crops and killing them and raping their women. They just want to be left alone. So how do you do that? Well, if you don't understand the importance of being free, I'm not sure I'm going to spend a lot of time and energy getting you to accept it, but when you want to be free—and isn't it interesting when the wall¹¹ came down? Were you surprised? Were you surprised that it just—

Flatt: No.

Beckwith: —came down that fast?

Flatt: Well, maybe that it came that fast, but—

Beckwith: “Mr. Khrushchev”—

Flatt: “Tear down that wall.”

¹¹ Berlin, Germany was partitioned between the Allies at the end of World War II. One day, without warning, the Russians quickly erected a substantial wall between East and West Berlin to restrict traffic—mostly to keep East Berliners from escaping to the West. Later, Gorbachev was the Russian Premier when addressed by Reagan.

- Beckwith: No, it wasn't Khrushchev. Gorbachev. "Mr. Gorbachev, **tear down this wall**," and within months, it was down. I was **blown away**, and then I thought, Why are you surprised? People want to be free. People who know what freedom is want to be **free**. Yeah.
- Flatt: It's interesting that we have, just in the past few days, seen the celebration of, I can't remember which anniversary now—must be the twentieth anniversary or—no, it'd be more than that—twenty-fifth, maybe—of the tear down of the wall.
- Beckwith: I think it's the thirtieth, isn't it?
- Flatt: And they symbolized it by having something like two thousand large domino-shaped things that were like ten—
- Beckwith: Twenty, twenty-fifth?
- Flatt: —like eight feet tall, and they set them up like dominos, and on the moment—
- Beckwith: I saw that.
- Flatt: Wasn't that something? They had these things all lined up, and you saw on the news the line of dominos falling down, representative of the fall of that wall. That was a wonderful moment.
- Beckwith: Was it '84 or '89? Might have been '89.
- Flatt: Well, Reagan was out in '88. Beckwith: Second term.
- Flatt: His second term ended early '89, so I can't remember.
- Beckwith: When was the election? Was it '89?
- Flatt: No, the election is always in the year that was divisible by four, so he was elected in '80 and '84, but of course the—
- Beckwith: And then '88, Bush was elected.
- Flatt: Yes.
- Flatt: But Reagan... They are president until January of the following year, so they actually go out of office—they're here for a very short time. (pause)
- Beckwith: (pause) The first foreign travel I did was with the Navy, and England is an amazing place—London is my favorite big city. Coming back to this country, though, is **special**. There's no place like it. my prayer is that my kids and everybody else appreciate it for what it is and what made it great. And what made it great were the principles set forth in the Constitution and the Bill of Rights, and it all being grounded in God. the one thing I got against my good

friend General Mills¹² is the case down in Hillsboro [Illinois] where he made them take “The world needs God” off the courthouse because he thought that was...

Flatt: Oh, he did? Dick Mills did that?

Beckwith: Yeah. He thought that was n relationship to the Bill of Rights that says there will be no state religion, which is a long way different than what Jefferson suggested, that there’s a separation between church and state only in the sense that the government shall not say...

Flatt: Establish.

Beckwith: ...there is a state religion. Establishment of religion.

Flatt: It’s the Establishment Clause, as they call it, right.

Beckwith: But how do you make that courthouse take it down when you’ve got “In God We Trust” on our coins? Of course, there are people who want to get that off. And we’ve got the Supreme Court that has the Ten Commandments up behind them, and yet in Alabama, they make them take it off. Somebody—maybe you’ve seen this—in every state constitution, the first article, there’s a reference to God—in every one. (pause)

Flatt: Well, your church and many churches now have many differences they are trying to resolve, and that’s a whole other topic. Maybe we should get together on another day to talk about it. You’re really sort of on the cusp of major events right about now.

Beckwith: We are, and I’m with the minority opinion in the Episcopal Church about the lightning-rod issues of sexuality—ordaining non-celibate homosexuals and blessing same-sex relationships—but it’s not really about that. That’s how it plays out in the culture, but to get to that place, you really have to jettison the principles of Christianity. You have to reject the authority of Scripture and the lordship of Jesus; otherwise you just say...

Flatt: Anything goes.

Beckwith: ...well, people may do that, but it’s not right, just like when I fall short of the standard God sets for me, for everybody. And I do. But to say somehow it doesn’t matter will destroy the Episcopal Church, and it’ll destroy any so-called religion that embraces those kinds of principles. The church is the church when it stands against society, not when it stands with society.

Flatt: That’s a good statement and perhaps a good place to end, Peter.

¹² General Richard H. Mills (Ret) was appointed a senior United States federal judge on the United States District Court for the Central District of Illinois.

Let me say that I think you have the energy and the intellect to work for positive outcomes, and I pray for you that you'll stay well and energetic for the challenges ahead.

Beckwith: Thank you very much.

Flatt: Thanks for your time.

Beckwith: As a guy who is looking to retire, that's quite an endorsement. But I'll never retire-retire, but—

Flatt: I'm sure you won't. (laughs)

Beckwith: —but just from this position.

Flatt: Well, thanks for your time, Peter, and especially for caring about America, and thank you for your service to our country.

Beckwith: It was an honor.

Flatt: This interview will make a substantial contribution to the historical record of our times at the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library, and for that, we thank you also. It's been a real pleasure for me.

Beckwith: Well, I have to put in my disclaimer that I can't imagine—I mean, out of the folks I've known and the service that they've given that this would even have a place. For a long time, since I heard a Marine lieutenant colonel say it twenty-five years ago: "I'm just a below-average guy trying to do above-average job." (Flatt laughs) When he said that—about himself—I thought, That's good. I like that. That fits.

Flatt: You know, that's true of so many Americans, I think.

Beckwith: I think it is. I think it is.

Flatt: People who grow up without privilege, work hard, and make something of themselves that's worthwhile.

Beckwith: Well, my folks are a good example of that.

Flatt: Sure, exactly.

Beckwith: And because of their expectations for me, I am what I am, and the discipline they loved me enough to give me, is responsible for the success I've made, along with all the other wonderful mentors I've had, particularly in the military and also in the church. But I'm quick to say that I got more training after seminary—clearly, after seminary—more training from the military about ministry than I ever did from the church.

Flatt: That's an interesting comment. (laughs)

Beckwith: They were excellent at what they did. Every year there'd be a two-week program dealing with all the important issues—archaeology, for example, scripture, Christian education, pastoral care—just wonderful continuing ed programs that they put on—and they **paid you** to go to them. How can you beat it?

Flatt: (laughs) Pretty hard to beat that.

Beckwith: Can't beat it.

Flatt: Well, Peter, thanks again. I really appreciate your time and sharing your thoughts with us.

Beckwith: Well, thank you. Thank you.

(end of interview)