

Veterans interviews – RETURN TO: Judy Allen, Choctaw Historic Projects, PO Box 1210, Durant OK 74702 – judy.allen@choctawnation.com. 580.513.7984.

Interview conducted by: Judy Allen at (location): McAlester Choctaw Community Center
Date and time: Thursday, Nov. 2, 2023 (his release was signed 9-6-23)

NAME -- Joe Smith

Birthday -- 11-22-52

PHONE - [REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

Are you Choctaw? Can you share a copy of your CDIB and/or Membership card? yes

In which branch did you enter?

In the Army Reserves in OKC; enlisted. Was in college at the time and couldn't get a college deferment, so to remain in school, joined the reserves for six long years.

Division -- 356th Transportation Co, stationed out of Norman, OK

Unit --

Were you Drafted or Enlisted or Commissioned? – enlisted

(If given a choice) Why did you choose that branch?

RANK at discharge: highest rank achieved. It was a little different since we were support – I was an E5 which is equivalent to Sgt.

Years served – from- 1972- to -- 78. I was 20 years old when I enlisted. Not married at the time. I met my wife in High School in 1969; and married in 73. We were both born and raised around OKC, I worked in car business many years and gentleman I worked for bought a dealership and I moved down here to work for him, I worked for him for 22 years at Nix Chevrolet

Peace or wartime? Vietnam war – didn't have to go overseas. We were put on alert a few times but didn't have to go.

The reserves meant training - 2 weeks in summer at summer camp and 1 weekend a month

Where did you attend basic training? -- Fort Knox KY and also was sent Fort Hood for Advanced training on turbine engine mechanics in helicopters. Was also sent to Aeronautical Depot Maintenance Center (ARADMAC) – Corpus Christi to train and to work. This naval training center was a nice, newer facility and we were able to stay in barracks. It was a treat to stay inside instead of tents. We had air conditioning at Corpus. At Fort Hood twice for summer camp and stayed in tents. The rest of the summers we were able to go to Corpus. We were near the ocean and it was nice to see the ocean. Some of us even went to Mexico while we were in the area.

WHERE DID YOU SERVE ? –

What was your job while in service? – mechanic – on helicopters. Some of the copters (newer models) went overseas but most were older models that we used for training. If you worked on it, you flew with it. Lost track of the number of hours in the air. Never worked on any planes other than helicopters.

Did you make any special friends in service? Who were they and do you have any stories? - I joined with a childhood friend – best buddy – and he was a year younger. There were two openings at the time in the reserves. Because of the Vietnam War, it was hard to get in the reserves. I talked my buddy into joining with me. Before we were out of training, about six months into our time in the reserves, they ended the Vietnam War. My buddy was Rocky Marshall. He was also from OKC. He now resides in Norman

I would recommend the reserves to anybody. It is difficult in some jobs to get time off. I worked six days a week on commission, so every weekend I was gone they were shorthanded at my job, and I didn't get paid.

And commanding officers that you especially remember?

One captain - Captain Maddox, who was a really nice guy, a good guy. He seemed to enjoy what he did and was a very good pilot. He was shot down in VN and was able to still land the aircraft. I thought being able to do that - he was a very good pilot. I always felt very safe and comfortable flying with him.

Closer to home while in the reserves:

I lived in OKC and had to travel to Norman to an old airport that wasn't being used. West Hammerfield – that is where we worked out of when the reserves took it over.

Was there a point during your service, that you decided the military was, or was not, the right career choice? (Please explain) –

I prob would have stayed longer but at the time I was coming up to be eligible for discharge, they had some open slots for higher rank. They had an E6 and E7 slot open and I was an E5. They were open for over a year and had not promoted anyone to those positions. When my retention officer came and talked to me about reenlisting, I told him if he would get my promotion I was due, then I would stay. He said it would prob take about a year to accomplish, So I said I would probably discharge.

That August I went to my reserve meeting and told my commanding officer I requested a discharge.

Is there a battle or point during your service that you would like to describe so that future generations can better understand what military life can be – for better or worse?

It interefered with family plans in reserve. In reg army you work M-F. I worked M-F in car business and S-S in the reserves once a month. It interrupted a lot of family plans. To do it over, I think I would go regular army.

MEDALS AND CITATIONS RECEIVED

I received two medals – Marksmanship Rifle and if you are in the military at time of war, you were awarded a medal.

Stories of Military Service:

What or who did you leave behind when you joined the service? (family, child, pet)

Girlfriend – Married her a year later. I came home on May 16, of 72 and got married June 30 of 72. They were highchool sweethearts. June of 2023 celebrated 50th wedding anniversary.

How did you get to your initial point of entry?

What type of training or schooling did you have?

What is your most vivid memory of your time training or in school? What was the BEST part? What was the WORST part

Fort Knox Ky in Nov was basic. I thought it was the coldest place on earth - it seems like it snowed or sleeted or rained every day we were there.

It was an artillery training base, they had lots of tanks, lots of shooting practice for the troops. We were walking to the rifle range one morning. There were tanks running all over the place and we could hear the tracks running. Over the hill, a tank comes over and runs right through the troops. Everyone scattered. They – the tank - were where they should not have been. We were on a paved road going to the rifle range and people were up and down it all day, every day.

What did you think about the chow? (at base and in the field!)

They cooked for us – we had a mess hall we ate in most of the time. In the field, or if we were gone to the rifle range, they would bring meals out to us.

What was your first assignment after basic training?

Went to Fort Eustis VA and we began training as mechanic.

What was the hardest part of training?

It wasn't really hard, some was boring, like when they sat you down and started telling you about all the stuff. It is hard to be interested until you get hands-on and started working.. I had just gotten out of school and didn't want to go back to school. It was hard just sitting there. The reward was the first time we got to go out and put hands on a helicopter. We got to take an engine off and put another one on. The instructor told us is to make sure you do your job and do it right. If you work on it, you fly in it. It was the first time I had flown. The first time I flew in a Huey Model B. They were coming up with a lot of new aircraft, and a lot were two-man helicopter, like the Cobra, an assault helicopter.

What was the hardest part of the military life-style for you to adapt to? Why do you think it was?

The toughest part was having to follow orders. Some drill Sgts and Sgts prob took advantage of their position. It (service) makes you grow up fast, there is no doubt about it.

What was the easiest part of the military life-style for you to adapt to? Why do you think it was?

I guess the routine. It was pretty much the same thing every day.

Wartime Service vs. peacetime service.

Were you in a combat, combat support, or combat service support role? Or did the war zone make that designation irrelevant?

Combat support role

) How did your (wartime) experience change you?

Makes you grow up fast. Makes you think about a lot of things. When I left for basic I had a girlfriend and six months later, I had a bride. It makes you think things out and makes you look down the road a little bit as to what direction you want to go.

How did you stay in touch with family and friends?

What did you do for recreation or when you were off duty? Went to beach, went fishing at Corpus the military ifacilyt had a place wher you could rent fishing equipment, Rvs, pretty much everything you could want. We would get rods and reels and fish for sharks. Never caught one. The locals would get in a truck inner tube and take line and bait to cast off - and paddle back to the pier and wait for a bite. They would clean it, and cut the jaw out and sell to tourist.

Didn't catch shark but caught ribbon fish; angel fish, we turned everything loose.

What was the best part of your service experience? It was an inconvenience to me because of the career path I had chosen 2 weeks out of year and one weekend a month. Most places don't give you a vacation the first two years. It was difficult in a lot of ways, but we survived it.

My wife worked when we were young for Hertz corporation. She worked at the big processing center.

How did you readjust to civilian life? Did you work or go back to school?

Retired from car dealership about three years ago. 17 years with Bob Moore Cadillac in OKC then went to auto collections (Ford Motor Co). They bought up all OKC ford dealerships and tried the new idea of one price at all dealerships, not very successful.

Mr Nix and I started at Bob Moore Cad about same time and were friends outside the dealership – he also went along with auto collection and everybody was offered pretty good \$ to stay with them. We did about two years. Mr. Nix said I don't want to alarm you but I am leaving the auto collection. He bought out Mellor Chevrolet in McAlester, changed to Nix, He bought out some of Fentons' dealership in McAlester and moved to that locaton. I stayed with Nix for 22 yeas and was in management 17 of those years.

Reflections

How has your military service impacted your feelings about war and the military in general?

I would rather war be there than here. What worries me most right now is having a 17-year old grandshon. IF we end up going overseas again, it is very concerning that the grandson would be forced to go.

Conclusion

Thank you for taking the time to share your recollections of your military service.

What do you wish more people knew about veterans?

I think there are people who are unaware of how wartime affects veterans. I have a good friend who has PTSD and looking at him, you wouldn't know. Every once in a while he will have an anxiety attack thinking about his time in Kuwait. Got shot in leg and knee. It does haunt him every once in a while. He did get to come back home and leads a pretty normal life. He has a service dog provided by the Veterans Adminsitration.

Questions not related to your military life:

Where were you born and who were your parents and siblings? Any of them veterans?

James Smith Sr and Laruth Wheeler Smith were parents. Choctaw from father side. My GGgrandmother was full blood Choctaw.

Two sisters and a brother. James Smith Jr, Jennifer Smith and Laurie Meyers. My brother went through the reserves and is part of the reason I got in. he let me know they had openings. My father was the paratroopers. Jumped from the planes. I believe he ws in the 82nd Airborne out of Fort Bragg.

What are some family traditions that have been passed down?

We used to deer hunt a lot til grandpa got older, and we meet every Thanksgiving and Christmas when the family gets together. They say when elders pass away the famly falls apart and we have tried to keep the family together. We lost my mom to covid about 3 years ago at 93 years of age.

Tried to make kids avid fishermen and hunters. They resisted quite a bit. Now that they are grown and marred they are avid outdoorsmen. Fishemen and hunters.

I have a daughter – and a son .

Do you speak any Choctaw? no

Do you have advice for future generations?

Follow your heart – do what you believe in. if you feel strongly about someing with faith, family, occupation, follow it. I enjoyed the business I was in. The best part was the people. It was never the same twice, every car deal you worked was all different. You enjoyed the easy ones. Work was rewarding.

How has COVID 19 affected your life? _____ Lost mom when she was 93, lost a best friend, and lost a brother in law.

Mr. Smith stays vaccinated. Was skeptical at first, because it was new. Too many close friends had covid, and died from covid.
